

## ON THE HERMENEUTICS OF EVIL

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# On the Hermeneutics of Evil

RÉSUMÉ. — *Cette étude s'interroge sur la question du mal dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur. En prenant pour objet le développement de sa réflexion sur cette question depuis le début de son œuvre philosophique jusqu'à sa dernière période, l'auteur tente de comprendre la manière dont Ricœur rend compte de ce phénomène en examinant trois axes majeurs dans la confrontation au mal : la compréhension pratique du mal (phronesis-mimesis-praxis), l'élaboration d'une réponse au problème (catharsis-Durcharbeitung), le pardon.*

ABSTRACT. — *This study examines the question of evil in the philosophy of Paul Ricœur. In interpreting the development of his reflection on this question from the beginning of his philosophical production until his final period, the author attempts to comprehend the way in which Ricœur accounts for this phenomenon in analyzing three major ways of approach to evil : a) practical understanding (phronesis-mimesis-praxis), b) working-through (catharsis-Durcharbeitung), and c) pardon.*

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The question of evil was an abiding concern of Paul Ricœur's philosophy. From *The Symbolism of Evil* published in 1960 to his influential 1985 essay, "Evil : A challenge to Philosophy and Theology", Ricœur sought to address the great challenge to human will and understanding represented by the enigma of evil. From the beginning, Ricœur recognized evil as an experience which could not be adequately dealt with by the human cogito or intentional consciousness. For here humans found themselves estranged from themselves, divided within, confronted by a "limit-situation" which shattered all illusions of autonomous sovereignty and exposed the self to disturbing experiences of finitude and fallibility.

The first part of this study will look at how Ricœur addressed the problem of evil in his early hermeneutic work. The second will analyze his later 1985 essay on the subject. And a final part will explore how Ricœur proposed a certain model of hermeneutic understanding by way of responding to the traumatic experience of evil in history and memory.

## SYMBOLS OF EVIL

The publication of *The Symbolism of Evil* marked Ricœur's transition from a phenomenology of will to a hermeneutics of symbol. It signaled a departure from descriptive phenomenology, as a reflection on intentional modes of consciousness, in favour of the hermeneutic conviction that meaning is never simply the intuitive possession of a subject but is always mediated through signs and symbols of inter-subjective existence. When confronted with evil we are reminded that there are meanings and experiences which defy the transparency of consciousness and contravene our will. The refractory character of evil, as something endured or suffered, prompts a philosophy of reflection to think again about the perennial problems of human fallibility, fault and finitude which by their very nature challenge the transparency of a purely immanent volition. Consequently the attempt to grasp the complexity of evil involves, at the outset, an interpretation of the myths and symbols of culture which mediate the experiences of evil, boundary experiences that cannot be immediately grasped by the rational faculties of the mind.

Ricœur's main aim in *The Symbolism of Evil* is to show how we can move from the category of *fallibility* to that of *fallenness*. How do we move from a) the possibility of evil to b) the actualization and avowal of evil. Common to both is the ontological condition of the human being as *fault* – in the double sense of a fault-line or fracture within the self which in turn allows for the reality of disproportion and dislocation in our moral acts, usually expressed in the soul being at variance with the passions. But this non-coincidence between self and self does not mean that we are *intrinsically* evil ; only that this potential exists within each one of us – and, as such, may be activated or not according to our free choice. One of the central arguments running through Ricœur's first hermeneutic work – the second part of the second volume of Ricœur's *Philosophy of Will* (the first part was entitled *Fallible Man*) – is that the Adamic and Biblical notions of evil represent a significant moral progress relative to previous cosmological and tragic accounts of evil as an external and ineluctable force in the universe. Against such deterministic accounts, Ricœur is determined to show how the emerging *anthropological* account of sin and guilt places the responsibility for evil more and more squarely on the shoulders of human agency. Where archaic notions of "defilement" saw evil as a contaminating force added to the soul from outside, the more ethical notion of "guilt" attributes evil to our own misuse of freedom. In short, where defilement sees evil as originating in an Other, guilt recognizes it as originating in the self. The guilty self is one which recognizes its own "servile will". Instead of blaming or scapegoating

others, it takes responsibility for itself as a “bad choice that binds itself”<sup>1</sup>. Moral conscience thus emerges as the internalizing of punishment and the acknowledging of wrong as one’s own fault.

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricœur engages in a rigorous interpretation of the seminal myths of evil in Western culture. These include 1) the myth of cosmic creation ; 2) the myth of tragic blindness ; 3) the myth of the Fall ; and 4) the myth of the exiled soul. The heroes who dramatise these mythic narratives include Prometheus, Œdipus, Adam and Orpheus. Adam represents for Ricœur the most explicitly anthropological account in that it separates evil from good unlike the stories of Prometheus (where the external divine figure of Zeus bears most responsibility for his misfortune) or Œdipus (where the monstrous sphinx and other agencies of cosmic destiny dictate his suffering and wrong-doing, e.g. parricide and incest). With the myth of Adam, we read of someone who brings evil into the world by his own decisions and actions. But while Ricœur clearly privileges the Adamic myth, he does not dismiss the potential truth-content of the other narratives. On the contrary, he suggests that a comparative cross-interpretation between the various myths reveals more and more of each one in a way which would not be possible if we took them purely in isolation.

Suspending the conventional definition of myth as a “false *explanation* by means of fables”, Ricœur attempts to recover myth’s genuinely *exploratory* function. Once we accept that myth cannot provide us with a scientific account of the actual origin of evil, we can begin properly to appreciate its disclosing role as a *symbolizing* power. Ricœur defines a symbol as a double intentionality, wherein one meaning is transgressed or transcended by another. As such, symbols of evil are works of language (signification) which provoke thought (interpretation). If we want to think evil, we must therefore begin with mythico-symbolic expressions such as the *stain*, the *fall*, *missing the mark*, *being imprisoned* or *wandering from the path*, all of which tell us something about the experience of the human being in the grips of evil.

Symbols of evil (like all symbols) have a literal meaning and a secondary analogical meaning. Thus, to take Ricœur’s famous example from *Symbolism of Evil*, the primitive image of somebody being “defiled” refers both to its *literal* function as a sign of physical uncleanliness and to its *symbolic* allusion to man’s impure or deviant relationship to the sacred. The literal meaning of a stain points beyond itself to the existential condition of contamination which is *like* a stain. Clearly we are not talking about an empirical stain on the soul, but rather a blighting of one’s inner existence analogous to the act of staining

1. *The Symbolism of Evil*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1967, p. 156 f. See also Karl SIMMS, *Paul Ricœur*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p. 9-28.

something white. What cannot be said directly – because it exceeds the limits of rational cogitation – is thus said indirectly or obliquely. As Ricœur puts it : “Contrary to the perfectly transparent technical signs, which say only what they want to say in positing that which they signify, symbolic signs are opaque, because the first, literal, obvious meaning itself points analogically to a second meaning which is not given otherwise than in it”<sup>2</sup>. It is because there is no *direct* discourse for the confession of evil that symbolism becomes the privileged means of expression. In other words, the experience of evil is always conveyed by means of expressions (defilement, rebellion, straying from the road, bondage and so on) borrowed from the field of everyday physical existence – expressions which refer *indirectly* to another kind of experience, namely our experience of the sacred.

But the symbolization of evil does not condemn us to irrationalism. On the contrary, says Ricœur, it calls us to deeper and more complex modes of interpretation. “The symbol”, as he puts it, “gives rise to thought” (*le symbole donne à penser*). Ricœur describes the basic rationale of *The Symbolism of Evil* as follows : “The servile condition of the evil will seemed to elude an essential analysis of phenomena. So the only practicable route was that of a detour via the symbols wherein the avowal of the fault was inscribed during the great cultures of which ours is the heir : the primary symbols of stain, guilt and sin ; the secondary symbols of myths of tragic blindness, of the fall of the soul, of wandering or decline ; the tertiary symbols and rationalizations of the servile will or of original sin. *The Symbolism of Evil* thus marked the turning of Husserlian phenomenology, already extended to the problematic of fallibility, towards a hermeneutics of symbols. By “symbols” I understood... all expressions of double meaning, wherein a primary meaning refers beyond itself to a second meaning which is never given directly”<sup>3</sup>.

What is original about Ricœur’s approach is his attempt to “re-enact in sympathetic imagination” the foundational myths whereby Western culture sought to communicate its first experiences of good and evil. Myths are understood by Ricœur as symbolic stories – or, to be more precise, as “species of symbols developed in the form of narration and articulated in a time and a space

2. *The Symbolism of Evil*, p. 15. Ricœur goes on to argue that symbolic expressions are *donative* in that a primary meaning gives rise to a secondary one which surpasses the first in its semantic range and reference. Further clarifying what he means by symbol, Ricœur contrasts it to allegory. While an allegory relates one meaning directly to another, without residue or ambiguity, a symbol works by enigmatic suggestion or evocation – it designates a *surplus* of meaning which exceeds the obvious one. Allegories have one meaning, symbols two or more.

3. “Introductory Response by Paul Ricœur”, in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1981. Cosmic symbols refer to a human’s earliest attempts to read good and evil in the world. Here the human imagination interprets aspects of the world – the heavens,

that cannot be coordinated with the time and space of history and geography”<sup>4</sup>. This hermeneutic act of revisiting the cosmic narratives of evil demands that Ricœur abandon Husserl’s phenomenological dream of a “philosophy without presuppositions”. Indeed, it presupposes that which descriptive phenomenology often tended to ignore – *language*. The hermeneutics of symbols must begin from a full language, insists Ricœur, from the recognition that before reflection and intuition *there are already symbols* : “It is by beginning with a symbolism already there”, as Ricœur observes, “that we give ourselves something to think about”<sup>5</sup>. The symbolism of evil is one of the most powerful, and disturbing, provocations to such thought.

#### FROM MYTH TO RESPONSIBILITY

In his 1985 essay, “Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology (1985)”, Ricœur returns to several of the issues raised in *The Symbolism of Evil* and offers a more developed hermeneutic critique of the different discursive responses to evil : these include, along with myth – lament and blame, wisdom, and theodicy<sup>6</sup>.

The first discursive response – *lament and blame* (witnessed in the Hebrew Bible, for example) – differentiates between evil as suffering and evil as wrongdoing. Lament refers to an evil that befalls us from outside. By contrast, blame

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the sun, the moon, the waters – *as* signs of some ulterior meaning. At this most basic level, the symbol is both a thing and a sign : it embodies and signifies at one and the same time. Or, to put it in another way, when dealing with cosmic symbols of evil we read the things of the world as signs, and signs as things of the world. As such, the symbolic imagination is already, at least implicitly, *linguistic*. Ricœur makes this clear in the following passage from *Freud and Philosophy* : “These symbols are not inscribed *beside* language, as modes of immediate expression, directly perceptible visages ; it is in the universe of discourse that these realities take on a symbolic dimension. Even when it is the elements of the world that carry the symbol – earth, sky, water, life – it is the word (of consecration, invocation or mythic narrative) which says their cosmic expressivity thanks to the double meaning of the *words* earth, sky, water, life”, that is, **a**) their obvious literal meaning as reference to things *and* b) their ulterior meaning, for example, water as a symbol of renewed spiritual life. Ricœur can thus affirm that the “expressivity of the world comes to language through the symbol as double meaning” (*De l’interprétation : essai sur Freud*, Éd. du Seuil, Paris, 1965, p. 23). For a cosmic symbol of good or evil occurs whenever language produces composite signs where the meaning, not “content to designate something directly, points to another meaning which can only be reached (indirectly) by means of this designation” (p. 24). Illustrating this linguistic property of symbols, Ricœur comments on the phrase from the Psalms, “The skies tell of the glory of God”, as follows : “The skies don’t speak themselves ; rather, they are spoken by the prophet, by the hymn, by the liturgy. One always needs the word to assume the world into a manifestation of the sacred (hierophany)” (p. 25).

4. *The Symbolism of Evil*, p. 18.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 19

6. Paul RICŒUR, *Figuring the Sacred : Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, Indianapolis, Fortress Press, 1995.

refers to evil that arises from within us and for which we are responsible. Or to put it another way, if lament sees us as victims, blame makes culprits of us<sup>7</sup>. Ricœur observes that, in fact, these two categories are almost always intertwined. We can feel guilty for committing an evil act while simultaneously experiencing seduction, or invasion, by an overwhelming force outside of us. But for the moment, we'll let the distinction stand.

The next discursive genre – *myth* – allows for the incorporation of evil into “great narratives of origin” (Mircea Eliade). These genealogical narratives, as Ricœur had already argued in *The Symbolism of Evil*, seek to explain the origin of evil in terms of the genesis of the cosmos (cosmogony). They offer a “plot” which configures the monstrosity of evil, explaining the source of the obscene and thereby taking some of the shock out of it. Such mythic spectacles make the foreign curiously familiar, the unbearable bearable, the outrageous accessible<sup>8</sup>. In mythological legends, considerations of human moral choice are inextricably linked to cosmological cycles of fate, destiny, or predestination. The evil figure is the alienated figure, that is, a self determined by some force beyond itself.

Myth then proceeds towards *wisdom* – Ricœur's next discursive category – to the extent that we not only recount the origins of evil but also seek to justify why such is the case for each one of us. In short, while myth narrates, wisdom argues<sup>9</sup>. It seeks to address the question not only of *why* but *why me*? The wisdom genre turns lament into a legal complaint. It tries to make moral sense of the monstrous. An exemplary case here is the Book of Job, where God and man engage in dialogue about the nature of creation and covenant. With such wisdom literature, the enigma of evil becomes less a matter of metaphysical givenness than of interpersonal relations (human-human or human-divine). In the conclusion to Job, arguments about retribution and justice are ultimately turned to a contemplative wisdom of love : Job learns to love Yahweh “for naught” in defiance of Satan's wager at the outset of the story.

Wisdom discourse gives way, in turn, to the fourth discursive account of evil listed in Ricœur's critical genealogy, namely, the *speculative*. This discourse begins, Ricœur argues, with the development of Christian theology. Augustine is the first great advocate of this position in his answer to the gnostics. In order to show that evil is not a substance implanted in the universe but a punishment (*poena*) for human sin (*peccatum*), Augustine invents a new category, “nothing-

7. Paul RICŒUR, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 250.

8. As Aristotle noted in *Poetics*, Dent, London, 1963, 111, 4-iv, 3 : “There is the enjoyment people always get from representations [...] we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, such as obscene beasts and corpses.”

9. Paul RICŒUR, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 252.

ness” (*nihil*). Evil is now construed as a deficiency in being which amounts to a privation of goodness (*privatio boni*). If there is evil in the world, therefore, it can only be the result of human action – that is, an act of turning away from the benign being of God towards a lack of being. Augustine thus proposes a radically moral vision of evil which replaces the genealogical question, *Unde malum ?*, with the question of willful human wrongdoing, *Unde malum faciamus ?* The cause of evil is not to be found in cosmology but in some form of willed action – the sins of the “bad will.” This leads in turn, of course, to a penal view of history where no one, in principle, should suffer unjustly. Everyone gets his or her reward, and all pain is a recompense for sin.

The difficulty for Augustine and subsequent theology was, as Ricœur notes, how to reconcile this extreme hypothesis of moral evil with the need to give sin a “supra-individual” and historical-generic account in order to explain how suffering is not always justly apportioned as a retribution for individual sins. For in countless cases it is clearly excessive. In other words, if evil is something we as humans do, it is also *done to us*. It is, at least in part, something we inherit, something already there. Augustine thus sought to reinterpret the Genesis tale of original sin in order to rationalize this apparently irrational paradox : namely, we are responsible but not *entirely* responsible for the evil we commit or endure. Thus does Ricœur attempt to respond to a paradox which remained unresolved in *The Symbolism of Evil*.

It was, Ricœur observes, but a short step from these Augustinian speculations on original sin to the fully-fledged theories of Western onto-theology. Here Ricœur enters territory not covered in his earlier work. The thinking of Leibniz, for example, invokes the principle of Sufficient Reason to account for the judicious balancing of good with evil in the “best of all possible worlds.” And if this balancing act of retribution and compensation is attributed to the infinite mind of God by Leibniz, it is dialectically humanized by Hegel and the German Idealists. Hegel’s “cunning of reason” silences the scandal of suffering by subsuming the tragic into a triumphant logic where all that is real is rational. Here the hubris of systematic speculation reaches its untenable extreme : “The more the system flourishes, the more its victims are marginalized. The success of the system is its failure. Suffering, as what is expressed by the voices of lamentation, is what the system excludes”<sup>10</sup>.

But Ricœur is of the view that neither version of theodicy – Leibnizian or Hegelian – can provide a convincing answer to the protest of unjust suffering : *Why me ?* This protest rightly and righteously continues to echo through the testimonies of evil from Job and Gethsemane to Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Nor

10. Paul RICŒUR, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 257.

can theodicy resist the debunking of “rational theology” in part three of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Indeed the greatness of Kant, for Ricœur, was to recognize the need to pass from a purely “theoretical” explanation of evil to a more “practical” one. This move from speculative explanation to moral-political action liberates the insight that evil is something that *ought not to be* and needs to be struggled against. By de-alienating evil and making it a matter of contingency rather than necessity (cosmogonic, theological, metaphysical, or historical), Kant brought us face to face with the *responsibility of action*.

Ricœur adds that if Kant freed us from the excess of rationalist speculation on evil, he also warned against the opposite extreme of drunken irrationalism (what he called *Schwaermerei*), the sort of mystical madness which submits to evil as an alien power that invades and overwhelms us at a whim. This latter view typifies not only belief in demonic possession but also the mystical profession of the “dark side of God” running from the Gnostics and Bruno to Boehme, Schelling, and Jung (e.g., *Answer to Job*). By taking the mystique out of evil, Kant removed some of its captivating power. He enabled us to see that evil is not a property of some external demon or deity but a phenomenon deeply bound up with the anthropological condition. Evil thus ceases to be a matter of paranoid projection and sacrificial scapegoating and becomes instead an affair of human responsibility. Absolutist dualities are overcome. One’s self becomes oneself-as-another and one’s other becomes another-as-oneself. Ricœur enthusiastically approves – at least thus far.

But even Kant, Ricœur is compelled to admit, could not totally ignore theaporetic character of evil. For if Kant clearly called for a response within the limits of practical human reason, he could never completely deny some residual inscrutability (*Unerforschbarkeit*) of evil. At one point, Kant even states that there may be “no conceivable ground from which the moral evil in us could originally have come”<sup>11</sup>. The lament of *Why? Why me? Why my beloved child?* remains as troublingly enigmatic as ever. Victims of evil cannot be silenced with either rational explanation (theodicy) or irrational submission (mysticism). Their stories cry out for other responses capable of addressing both the alterity and the humanity of evil.

So for all his endorsements of the anthropologizing of evil – in this 1985 essay as well as in *The Symbolism of Evil* – Ricœur returns once again to the ultimately paradoxical character of evil. And, once again, he fully acknowledges here a radical on-going challenge to both philosophical and theological reason. A challenge which, he suggests, can perhaps best be met by some form of

11. Immanuel KANT, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1960, p. 38. Cited by Paul RICŒUR, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 258-259.

hermeneutic understanding, attentive to the various aporias and enigmas that the expressions of evil expose. In the final part of this essay, I will look at some ways in which Ricœur's hermeneutics of narrative understanding might help us confront the problem of evil in history and memory.

#### NARRATING HISTORICAL EVIL

A key power of narrative, claims Ricœur, is to "provide ourselves with a figure of something"<sup>12</sup>. So doing, we can make present what is absent. Translated into the idiom of historical time, we are dealing here with the capacity to liberate ourselves from the blind amnesia of the "now" by projecting futures and retrieving pasts. Projection is an emancipatory function of narrative understanding, retrieval a testimonial function. Both resist the contemporary tendency to reduce history to a "depthless present" of "irreferance"<sup>13</sup>.

In the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, and again in *History, Memory and Forgetting*, Ricœur analyses the "testimonial" role of narrative when confronting historical trauma and evil. The whole problem of Holocaust testimony is central to this analysis. A hermeneutics of narrative, he maintains, must include a sense of ethical responsibility to "the debt we owe the dead"<sup>14</sup>. We would not be able to respond to the summons of historical memory were it not for the mediating/schematizing function of narrative imagination, which provides us with "figures" for events that happened but are suppressed from memory. The responsibility here is twofold. On the one hand, narrative provides us with figural reconstructions of the past that enable us to see and hear things long since gone. On the other, it stands-in-for, by standing-for, these things as events that actually happened. Here we encounter the right of the past, as it once was, to incite and rectify our narrative retellings of history. We recall our debt to those who have lived and suffered evil. We remind ourselves, for example, that

12. Paul RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 184-85.3. Earlier versions of this section appeared as "Remembering the Past : The Question of Narrative" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 24, no 2/3, 1998, and as "The Narrative Imagination" in our *Poetics of Modernity*, Humanities Press, Atlantic Heights, New Jersey, 1995.

13. See my critique of this postmodern cult of "irreferance" in the conclusion to my *Wake of Imagination*, St. Paul, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, and in Chapter 6 and "Afterwords" of my *Poetics of Imagining*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 170, 232. See also Fredrick JAMESON's critique in "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 145, 1984, p. 53-91. For BAUDRILLARD's own account of this sublime "irreferance" of simulation, see *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983. For LYOTARD's account of sublime "irrepresentability", see *The Inhuman*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 136.

14. Paul RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, p. 185-186.

gas ovens and gulags did exist, that Nagasaki and Cambodia were bombed, that political crimes and injustices have been inflicted on innocent people over the centuries. These were not simulations. They actually happened.

The ostensible paradox here is, of course, that it should be narrative that responds to the ethical summons to respect the “reality of the past.” It is ironic that it should be poetics that comes to the service of ethics as a means of recalling our debt to those who suffered and died (and are often forgotten). But this is the case. Narrative serves in this way to recall the neglected “others” of history, for, as Ricoeur remarks, “it is always through some transfer from Same to Other, in empathy and imagination, that the Other that is foreign is brought closer”<sup>15</sup>.

This process of transfer, however, is by no means obvious. In addition to narrative reenactment – which reappropriates the past as present under the category of the Same –, hermeneutic understanding has a duty to the otherness of the past by way of expressing the past precisely as past, that is, as something that is no more. We are dealing here with a dual fidelity to past suffering as sameness and difference. The hermeneutic act of *transfer by analogy* seeks to address this paradox. It enables us to transport ourselves into alien or eclipsed moments, refiguring them as similar to our present experience (failing which we would not be able to recognize them), while simultaneously acknowledging their dissimilarity as distinct and distant. In short, the narrative re-appropriation of past experiences of evil operates according to a double responsibility : to the past as *present*, and to the past as *past*.

To the extent that it remains ethically responsible, the historical remembering of trauma refuses to allow reconstruction to become a reduction of the other to the self ; it resists absorbing difference into sameness<sup>16</sup>. So when we talk of narrative providing us with “analogies” of the past as-it-actually was, we do well to appreciate that the analogous “as” is a two-way trope of absence/presence. We should never underestimate the radically unique, heterogeneous and irreducible nature of the experience of those who suffered evil in the past. This alterity cannot be wished away by an act of facile imaginative “appropriation”.

This point merits development. Narratives of the past comprise an interweaving of fiction and history. Once we recognize that historical narratives of evil entail a refiguring of past events, we can admit that the telling of history involves the deployment of certain literary practices – plot, composition, character, point-of-view, and so on. This is why the same text can be at once a great work of

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

history and a great work of fiction. It can tell us about the way things actually happened in the past at the same time that it makes us see, feel, and live the past as if we were there. Moreover, this “fiction-effect” of history can often enhance, rather than diminish, the task of standing-for. One thinks, for example, of holocaust testimonies by Élie Wiesel or Primo Levi, not to mention the countless more “novelistic” accounts by writers like Thomas Kenneally and Aharon Appelfeld. Otherwise put, narrative can serve historical experiences of evil, and this service entails ethical as well as poetical dimensions.

The deployment of novelistic techniques by historians and witnesses, as well as by fiction writers, to place some past event or personage vividly before the reader’s mind was already recognized by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, under the title of *lexis* or “locution” – a way of making things visible *as if* they were present. The danger is, of course, that the figural “as if” might collapse into a literal belief, so that we would no longer merely “see-as” but make the mistake of believing we are *actually* seeing. This “hallucination of presence” (easily conducive to dogmatism and fundamentalism) calls, in Ricœur’s view, for ethical vigilance by historians in order to sustain a proper dialectical balance between empathy and distance.

But freedom from illusion is not the only ethical responsibility of narrative. Equally important is the responsibility to refigure certain events of deep ethical intensity that conventional historiography might be tempted to overlook in favor of a so-called objective explanation of things. In a case like the Holocaust, it would seem that such a practice of “neutralization” is quite inappropriate. The biblical watchword *Zakhor*, “Remember!”, is more ethically fitting in such circumstances. This is something Primo Levi, a first-hand witness and survivor of the camps, makes hauntingly evident in his resolve to tell the story as it happened in the most vivid fashion imaginable. The recourse to narrative tropes and devices to achieve this impact is motivated throughout by an ethical imperative: People must never be allowed to forget this evil lest it happen again. Or as Levi himself put it in his conclusion to *Si c’est un homme*: “The need to recount to ‘others’, to make the ‘others’ participate, acquired in us before and after our liberation the vehemence of an immediate impulse... and it was in response to such a need that I wrote my book”<sup>17</sup>.

17. Primo LEVI, *Si c’est un homme*, Paris, Julliard, 1987. For further discussion of this ethical role of narrative memory, see my *Poetics of Imagining*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 220-228, and Claude LANZMANN’s review of *Schindler’s List*, “Holocauste, la représentation impossible”, in *Le Monde*, February 1994. In addition to the fictional and cinematic narratives of the Holocaust, it would be useful to consider how other narratives of traumatic events in history are retold in contemporary novels or films – e.g., Oliver Stone’s retelling of Vietnam in *Platoon*, Costa Gavras’s retelling of the Chilean coup in *Missing*, Gerry Conlon’s and Jim Sheridan’s retelling of the Guildford four injustice in *In the Name of the Father*, and so on. Be it a question of documentary

In such cases, “rememoration” of evil takes on an ethical character quite distinct from the triumphalist commemoration of history’s great and powerful. Where the latter tends to legitimate ideologies of conquest, the former moves in the opposite direction, namely, toward a felt reliving of past suffering as if we (readers/listeners/spectators) had actually been there. The distinction is important for Ricœur. The cause of the *tremendum horrendum* needs narrative to plead its case lest it slip irrevocably into oblivion. The horrible must *strike* us as horrible. “Horror attaches to events that must never be forgotten”, writes Ricœur.

It constitutes the ultimate ethical motivation for the history of victims. The victims of Auschwitz are, par excellence, the representatives in our memory of all history’s victims. Victimization is the other side of history that no cunning of reason can ever justify and that, instead, reveals the scandal of every theodicy of history<sup>18</sup>.

In such instances, the refigurative powers of narrative prevent historians from neutralizing injustice. It prevents historiography from explaining history away. And this ethical task of preserving the specificity of past suffering from sanitizing homogenization applies not only to positivist historians but also to the abstract speculations of certain philosophers. Ricœur is perhaps thinking here of Hegel’s Ruse of Reason or Heidegger’s musings on the Destiny of *techné* (which put gas chambers and combine-harvesters into the same category)<sup>19</sup>.

The ethical role of narrative understanding in remembering the horrible is tied to a specific function of individuation : namely, the need to respect the uniquely unique character of certain historical events. Dachau, Hiroshima, the Gulag, the Armenian massacre, Mai Lai, Bloody Sunday, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, Sabra and Chatilla, Tienehmien Square. Such historical horrors of our century cannot be explained away as cogs in some dialectical wheel. They are more than epiphenomena of the *Zeitgeist*. Yet it is just this tendency to relativise evil that our current culture of simulation evinces when it reduces narrative to a play of imitation devoid of historical reference. Frederic Jameson decries this tendency to eclipse the historically unique as a “postmodern cult

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drama, fictional history, or historical fiction, in each case we are concerned with an interweaving of fiction and history. No matter how “empirical” and “objective” a historical account claims to be, there is no denying its reliance on narrative strategies of selection, heightening, arrangement, invented speeches, and reconstructed events, not to mention its need for coherence and connection. As Hayden White puts it, the historian “must choose the elements of the story he would tell. He makes his story by including some events and excluding others, by stressing some and subordinating others. This process of exclusion, stress and subordination is carried out in the interest of constituting a story of a particular kind. That is to say, he “emplots” his story” (*Metahistory*, p. 6).

18. Paul RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative*, p. 187.

19. See WOLIN, *The Heidegger Controversy*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992.

of the depthless present”<sup>20</sup>. But other commentators, Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard among them, seem at times to celebrate this liquidation of reference. Lyotard claims narrative forms of imagination betray the “irrepresentable” nature of the postmodern sublime, while Baudrillard hails the postmodern condition of “irreference” where even the reality of war is reduced to TV games of spectacle and simulation<sup>21</sup>. We can no longer distinguish, some postmodernists hold, between what is real and unreal in the representation of things. And one is tempted to conclude that it is a short step from Baudrillard’s kind of thinking here to the claims of revisionist historians like Faurisson or David Irving that the gas chambers never existed (or Nolte’s claim that the Holocaust is not a unique event of evil but merely one of a variety of similar events). In any case, what the postmodern cult of “irrepresentability” and “irreference” appears to put in question is the power of narrative to retrieve historically real events for our ethical consideration in the here and now.

Against such a position, Ricœur replies : The more narrative singularizes historical experiences of evil, the more we strive to understand them (rather than simply suffer them as emotional trauma). It is not then a question of opposing “subjective” narration to “objective” understanding. It is a question of appreciating that the comprehension of evil without narration risks becoming inhuman, just as the narration of evil without hope of some possibility of understanding runs the risk of blind irrationalism. The refigurative act of standing-for the past provides us with a “figure” to experience *and* think about, to both feel *and* reflect upon. “Fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator”, as Ricœur puts it, “Eyes to see and to weep. The present state of literature on the Holocaust provides ample proof of this... one counts the cadavers or one *tells the story* of the victims”<sup>22</sup>. If history-telling, therefore, forfeits this testimonial vocation, it risks becoming a spectacle of exotica or else a repository of dead fact. Neither option is acceptable. “There are crimes that must not be forgotten, victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration”, Ricœur protests. “The will not to forget alone can prevent these crimes from ever occurring again”<sup>23</sup>.

This ethical task of testimony is not simply an individual responsibility. It is also a collective one. Here, it seems, the ethical debt to the dead joins forces with the poetical power to narrate. And we recall that the two modes of narrative – fiction and history – share a common origin in epic, which has the character-

20. See JAMESON, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster, London, Pluto Press, 1985.

21. See Jean BAUDRILLARD, *Simulations*.

22. Paul RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, p. 188.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

ristic of preserving memories on the communal scale of societies. Placed in the service of the not-to-be-forgotten, this poetic power permits us to live up to the ethical task of collective anamnesis.

The ethical task of narrative understanding faced with the problem of historical evil may be summarized, accordingly, under the following aspects : 1) a testimonial capacity to bear witness to the reality of the past (with its often untold suffering of evil) ; 2) an analogizing capacity to make present those who are absent and “other” than ourselves (our debt to the forgotten dead) ; and 3) an imaginative capacity to project future possibilities where justice might at last prevail<sup>24</sup>.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000) Ricœur argues that forgiveness may release the historical past into a different, freer future<sup>25</sup>. For genuine amnesty does not and cannot come from blind forgetfulness (amnesia), but only from a remembering which is prepared to forgive the past by emancipating it from the deterministic stranglehold of violent obsession and revenge. Genuine forgiveness, as Ricœur observes, involves not a forgetting of the events themselves but a different way of *signifying* a debt to the dead which paralyzes memory – and, by implication, our capacity to re-create ourselves in a new future. The proper task of amnesty is not to efface the memory of crimes. It is rather to remember them so as to dissolve some of the more crippling aspects of debt they may have accrued. “Forgiveness is a sort of healing of memory, the completion of its mourning period. Delivered from the weight of debt, memory is liberated for great projects. Forgiveness gives memory a future.” Ricœur claims accordingly that it is not a contradiction to say that amnesty is the strict corollary of forgiving memory even as it is the strict contrary of “repetition memory”<sup>26</sup>.

Critical caution is clearly called for here. Narrative memory is never innocent. It is an ongoing conflict of interpretations : a battlefield of competing meanings. Every history is told from a certain perspective and in the light of specific prejudice (at least in Gadamer’s sense). Memory, as suggested above, is not always on the side of the angels. It can as easily lead to false consciousness and ideological closure as to openness and tolerance. One only has to recall the recent controversies around Holocaust denial to appreciate the stakes involved. This distorting power is sometimes ignored by contemporary advocates of narrative ethics – MacIntyre, Nussbaum, Booth – who, unlike Ricœur, tend to

24. For a development of these three functions of narrative imagination, see the “Afterwords” to my *Poetics of Imagining*, Edinburgh University Press/Fordham University Press, New York, 1998.

25. Paul RICŒUR, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Éd. du Seuil, Paris, 2000, especially epilogue on “Le pardon difficile”.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

downplay the need for a hermeneutic of critical suspicion. Nor is it properly appreciated by those advocates of the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, "The Use and Abuse of History for Life", who believe it is sufficient to "actively forget the past", to have done with it. Ricœur does not share such a sanguine belief.

We may say, in summary, then that Ricœur endeavours to balance a) our duty to attest to the incomparable *singularity* of a unique event like Auschwitz, with b) our duty to testify to the representative *universality* of good and evil. The truth is no doubt to be found in some kind of Aristotelian mean which combines both ethical impulses in delicate tension. That is what a practical wisdom (*phronesis*) of historical narrative requires in our age of easy forgetfulness – a proper balance between the dual fidelities of memory to the *uniqueness* and *communicability* of past events. As Ricœur observes :

We must remember because remembering is a moral duty. We owe a debt to the victims. And the tiniest way of paying our debt is to tell and retell what happened at Auschwitz. [...] By remembering and telling, we not only prevent forgetfulness from killing the victims twice ; we also prevent their life stories from becoming banal... and the events from appearing as necessary<sup>27</sup>.

Sometimes, in some places – Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kashmir –, it is important to let go of the paralyzing hold of evil suffered in order to surmount the instincts of resentment and revenge. At other times, in other places – Auschwitz being the time and place *par excellence* –, it is essential to remember the past in order to honour our "debt to the dead" and to ensure it never happens again. Narrative remembrance, as analysed by Ricœur, can serve two functions : it can help us to represent the past as it really was *or* to reinvent it as it might have been. In fiction, the role of reinvention is what matters most – even in historical novels like *War and Peace*. In historical testimonies of evil, by contrast, the function of veridical recall claims primacy. Distinguishing between these two separate, if often overlapping, functions is, for Ricœur, of crucial ethical import. As is discerning *when* it is right to remember and *when* it is better to forget. Or, indeed, *how much* we should remember or forget<sup>28</sup>.

27. Paul RICŒUR, *Memory of Suffering*, p. 290.

28. Paul RICŒUR, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, especially Part 3 entitled "La condition historique".

## CONCLUSION

How then can Ricœur acknowledge the enigma of evil, laid bare by his various accounts, while still addressing Tolstoy's question : *What is to be done* ? He proposes a three-fold approach : a) practical understanding (*phronesis-mimesis-praxis*) ; b) working-through (*catharsis-Durcharbeitung*), and c) pardon.

a) "Practical understanding" is the name Ricœur gives to that limited capacity of the human mind to *think* the enigma of evil. He draws, it seems, from such varied models as biblical "wisdom" (discussed above), Aristotle's "practical wisdom" (*phronesis*), Kant's "practical reason" (indeterminate judgment), and his own original notion of "narrative understanding". What each of these models has in common is an ability to transfer the aporia of evil from the sphere of theory (*theoria*) – proper to the exact knowledge criteria of logic, science, and speculative metaphysics – to the sphere of a more practical art of understanding (*techne/praxis*), which allows for an approximate grasp of phenomena : what Aristotle calls "the flexible rule of the architect". Where speculative theory, epitomized by theodicy, explained evil in terms of ultimate causal or creationist origins, Ricœur's model of practical understanding is geared towards a more hermeneutic comprehension of the indeterminate, contingent, and singular characteristics of evil – while not abandoning all claim to quasi-universal criteria (which might account for at least a minimally shared sense of evil). Such practical understanding borrows from action the conviction that evil is something that ought not to be and must be struggled against. In that sense, it resists the fatalism of archaeologies of evil to be found in both mythology and theodicy. And it does so in favor of a future-oriented praxis.

The ultimate response offered by practical understanding is to *act against* evil. Instead of acquiescing in the face of an origin that precedes us, action turns our understanding towards the future "by the idea of a *task* to be accomplished." The moral-political requirement to act does not, Ricœur insists accordingly, abandon the legitimate quest for some minimal model of reasonable discernment. It in fact demands it. For how could we act against evil if we could not identify it, that is, if we could not critically discriminate between good and evil ? In this respect, the genuine struggle against evil presupposes a critical hermeneutic of discernment. And such hermeneutic understanding retains Kant's insistence on a practical reason that seeks to think somehow the unthinkable. And to do so with what Ricœur calls the "sobriety of a thinking always careful not to transgress the limits of knowledge"<sup>29</sup>.

29. Paul RICŒUR, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 259.

Our critical understanding of evil may never surpass the provisional nature of Kant's indeterminate (that is, "aesthetic reflective") judgment. But it at least judges. And it does so in a manner alert to both the singular alterity of evil and to its quasi-universal character as grasped by the *sensus communis*. This is not exact or adequate judgment but a form of judgment for all that, based on the practical wisdom conveyed by narratives and driven by moral justice. We may say, consequently, that practical judgment is not only "phronetic" but "narrative" in character. This overlapping of *phronesis* (Aristotle) and judgment (Kant) is neatly captured in Ricœur's account of the ethical role of narrative :

Ethics as Aristotle conceived it, and as it can still be conceived today, speaks abstractly of the relation between virtue and the pursuit of happiness. It is the function of poetry in its narrative and dramatic form, to propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute so many *thought experiments* by which we learn to link together the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune. By means of poetry we learn how reversals of fortune result from this or that conduct, as this is constructed by the plot in the narrative. It is due to the familiarity we have with the types of plot received from our culture that we learn to relate virtues, or rather forms of excellence, with happiness or unhappiness. These "lessons" of poetry constitute the "universals" of which Aristotle spoke ; but these are universals that are of a lower degree than those of logic and theoretical thought. We must none the less speak of understanding but in the sense that Aristotle gave to *phronesis*. [...] In this sense I am prepared to speak of phronetic understanding in order to contrast it with theoretical understanding. Narrative belongs to the former and not to the latter<sup>30</sup>.

b) If practical understanding addresses the action-response to evil, it sometimes neglects the suffering-response. Evil is not just something we struggle against. It is also (as noted above) something we undergo. To ignore this passivity of evil suffered is, Ricœur concludes, to ignore the extent to which evil strikes us as shockingly strange and disempowering. It is also to underestimate that irreducible alterity of evil which myth and theodicy tend to overestimate. One of the wisest responses to evil is, on this count, to acknowledge its traumatizing effects and work-them-through (*durcharbeiten*) as best we can. Practical understanding can only redirect us toward action if it has already recognized that some element of estrangement almost always attaches to evil, especially when it concerns illness, horror, catastrophe, or death. No matter how prepared we are to make sense of evil, we are never prepared enough. That is why the "work of mourning" is so important as a way of not allowing the inhuman nature of suffering to result in a complete "loss of self" (what Freud called "melancholia").

30. Paul RICŒUR, "Life in Quest of Narrative" *On Paul Ricœur : Narrative and Interpretation*, David Wood (ed.), London, Routledge, 1991, p. 23.

Some kind of catharsis is necessary to prevent the slide into fatalism that all too often issues in despairing self-destruction. The critical detachment brought about by cathartic mourning elicits a wisdom that turns *passive lament* into the possibility of *active complaint*, that is, *protest*<sup>31</sup>.

The role played by narrative testimonies is, as we saw, crucial in this respect. For such narrative rememberings invite the victim to escape the alienation of evil, that is, to move from a position of mute helplessness to speech-acts of revolt and (where possible) self-renewal. Some kind of narrative working-through is necessary, it seems, for survivors of evil not to feel crippled by grief or guilt (about the death of others and their own survival) nor to succumb to the game of the “expiatory victim.” What the catharsis of mourning-narrative allows is that new actions are still possible *in spite of evil suffered*. It detaches us from the obsessional repetitions and repressions of the past and frees us for a future. For only thus can we escape the disabling cycles of retribution, fate, and destiny : cycles which alienate us from our power to act by instilling the view that evil is overpoweringly alien – that is, irresistible. Working-through the experience of evil – narratively, practically, cathartically – helps us to take the allure out of evil. And so doing it enables us to distinguish between possible and impossible modes of protest and resistance. Working-through is central to a hermeneutics of action in that makes evil *resistible*. In sum, by transforming the alienation and victimization of lament into a moral response of just struggle, Ricœur’s hermeneutics of understanding and action offers a powerful, if partial, response to the challenge of evil.

c) Finally, we return to the difficult – and often ostensibly impossible – issue of forgiveness. Against the “never” of evil, which makes pardon impossible, we are asked to embrace what Ricœur calls the “marvel of a once again” which makes it possible<sup>32</sup>. But the possibility of forgiveness is a “marvel” precisely because it surpasses the limits of rational calculation and explanation. There is a certain gratuitousness about pardon due to the very fact that the evil it addresses is not part of some dialectical necessity. Pardon is something that makes little sense before we give it but much sense once we do. Before it occurs it seems impossible, unpredictable, incalculable in terms of an economy of exchange. There is no science of forgiveness. And yet this is precisely where phronetic understanding, attentive to the particularity of specific evil events, joins forces with the practice of patient working-through – their joint aim being to ensure

31. See Sigmund FREUD, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12. Ricœur elaborates further in this theme in *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Éd. du Seuil, Paris, 2000.

32. Paul RICŒUR, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, especially the epilogue entitled “Le pardon difficile”, p. 593-658.

that past evils might be prevented from recurring. Such prevention often requires pardon as well as protest in order that the cycles of repetition and revenge give way to future possibilities of non-evil. This is a good example of Ricœur's claim that pardon gives a future to the past.

Cathartic narration can, Ricœur concludes, help to make the impossible task of pardon that bit more possible. This is why, as we noted, amnesty is never amnesia. The past must be recollected and worked-through so that we can identify, *grosso modo*, what it is that we are forgiving. For if pardon is beyond reason, it is never completely blind. And if it is mobilized by the gratuity of love – which calls for that element of extra or excess – it is never insensitive to the logic of justice. Or to put it in Pascal's terms, pardon has its reasons that reason cannot comprehend. Perhaps only a divinity could forgive indiscriminately. And there may indeed be some crimes that a God alone is able to pardon. Even Christ had to ask his Father to forgive his crucifiers: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." As man alone he could not do it. Impossible for us, possible for God. But here an ethics of pardon approaches the threshold of a religious hermeneutics.

If philosophy is to continue to address the perennial enigma of evil, it might do well to take a lead from Ricœur's hermeneutic response. First, by conducting hermeneutic analyses of the principal discourses deployed in the history of theology and philosophy to represent the enigma of evil. And, second, by advancing new modes of recognition and renewal. We need both a hermeneutics of interpretation and an ethics of active forgiveness. For as Ricœur continually reminds us, it is not enough to interpret our world of suffering and injustice, we must also try to change it.

#### NOTES

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