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Essays on the Hermeneutics of Action
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Narrative imagination: between ethics and poetics

Imagination has been an abiding, if often inconspicuous, preoccupation of Paul Ricoeur. In most of his works Ricoeur speaks less of imagination itself than of its multifarious expressions in symbol, metaphor, myth, dream, narrative and the social imaginary. This indirect approach is, I suspect, a scruple of hermeneutic detour inspired by the Kantian conviction that imagination is an 'art hidden in the depths of nature . . . a blind but indispensable faculty of the human soul'. If imagination indeed recurs in the dramatis personae of Ricoeur's work, it usually comes on stage masked, doffs a variety of costumes, and generally prefers the discreet voice of prompter to that of central performer.

In his conclusion to 'Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics', first published in 1972, Ricoeur offers this hint of tacit agendas:

Allow me to conclude in a way which would be consistent with a theory of interpretation which places the emphasis on 'opening up a world'. Our conclusion should also 'open up' some new perspectives, but on what? Perhaps on the old problem of the imagination which I have carefully put aside. Are we not ready to recognize in the power of the imagination, no longer simply the faculty of deriving 'images' from our sensory experience, but the capacity for letting new worlds shape our understanding of ourselves? This power would not be conveyed by images, but by the emergent meanings in our language. Imagination would thus be treated as a dimension of language. In this way, a new link would appear between imagination and metaphor. We shall, for the time being, refrain from entering this half-open door.'
In later works, from *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977) to *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986), *Du texte à l'action* (1986), and *Time and Narrative* (1984–8), Ricoeur returns at telling moments to this ‘half-open door’ and offers glimpses of what lies ahead. But, he has not yet pushed the door wide open. Perhaps his reserve expresses recognition that the passage from philosophical reflection to the ‘hidden art’ of imagination represents a hermeneutic threshold where philosophizing, in the strictly speculative sense, ends and poetics begins? Or perhaps there is a further sense of the limit at work here—a boundary marking a flexible but necessary divide between the poetical imagination (where all is permitted and ‘passion for the possible’ reigns supreme) and the ethical imagination (answerable to the suffering and action of real human beings)? Such a boundary would serve as a frontier post, where imagination exchanges the immunity of poetic license for a sense of responsibility to others—dead and living, present and past—towards whom we carry an irremissible debt. A critical hermeneutics of imagination functions accordingly as a *mentalité frontalière*, safeguarding the distinction between poetics and ethics while simultaneously invigilating moments of transition and interchange between them. That, at least, is a hypothesis I explore in what follows.

I have documented elsewhere the development of Ricoeur’s theory of imagination from his early to later works. Here I propose to concentrate on one aspect of this theory, narrative. I will confine most of my remarks to two—in my view crucial—passages in Volume 3, Part 2 of *Time and Narrative* (1984–8). The first features in the chapter ‘The Interweaving of History and Fiction’ and deals with the function of historical imagination. The second features in the ‘Conclusion’ and focuses on the problem of narrative identity in poetics and ethics.

In the first passage, Ricoeur argues that time is made human through the interweaving of history and fiction—or more precisely through the ‘refiguration’ of time in historical and fictional narrative. Imagination has a pivotal role here: 1) as a ‘standing-in-for-the-past’; and, 2) as a return ticket from the world of the text to the world of the reader. Narrative imagination embraces both processes of refiguration—historical and fictional.

The interaction between historical and fictional narrative leads Ricoeur into an extended analysis of the function of imagination in
reading. While history and fiction are clearly not the same (‘historians argue, poets invent’), there is a convergence of the imaginative intentionalities of history and fiction at the level of the reader. Here history and fiction ‘concretize’ each other’s intentionalities. For narrative theory this concretization corresponds to the phenomenon of ‘seeing as’ in metaphorical reference (analyzed in detail in The Rule of the Metaphor). It arises in relation to our historical consciousness’s standing-for-the-past through the use of analogy; and, again in the actualization of a text considered as a work to be performed. But these ‘concretizations’ occur only when history makes use of fiction and fiction makes use of history – both for the same end, namely, the refiguration of time. This reciprocal concretization marks the triumph of the notion of figure in the form of “imagining that”; or more literally: “providing oneself with a figure of” [se figurer que] . . . .5

Concerning the first of these modes of concretization – the fictionalization of history – Ricoeur makes it clear that he is not just talking about the role of narrative imagination in ‘configuration’ (i.e. emplacement/mise-en-intrigue). He is thinking more specifically of the way imagination intends the past ‘as it actually was’. This latter intention does not mean denying the difference between a ‘real past’ and an ‘unreal’ one; rather, it requires that we demonstrate in what unique way the narrative imagination is interpolated into the ‘intended having-been’ of history.

What are the implications of such a claim? The specific character of historical reference to the past is that it seeks to reinscribe the time of narrative within the time of the universe. But, curiously, it is precisely in respect of this ‘realist thesis’ that imagination enters into the intending of what has been. It does so under three main rubrics: the calendar; the succession of generations; and the trace.

Already, at the level of a calendar, the ‘reading of signs’ involves an act of translation that brings together two perspectives on time – the natural/cosmic/physical motion of planets, on the one hand, and lived human time, on the other. The calendar enlists the schematizing power of the imagination in conjoining astronomical and social dimensions; and this schematizing clearly entails an interpretation of signs (similar to the reading of a sundial or clock). ‘Dates are assigned to potential presents, to imagined presents’, as Ricoeur puts it, and in this manner all memories accumulated by collective memory become dated events, due to their reinscription in calendar time.4

Amplifying the range of schematizing connectors between narrative and universal time, Ricoeur explains how the ‘succession of generations’ combines a biological component and an imaginative one:
It is always possible to extend recollection through the chain of ancestral memories, to move back in time by extending this regressive movement through imagination, just as it is possible for every one of us to situate our own temporality in the series of generations, with the more or less necessary help of calendar time. In this sense, the network of contemporaries, predecessors and successors schematizes — in the Kantian sense of the term — the relation between the more biological phenomenon of the succession of generations and the more intellectual phenomenon of the reconstruction of the realm of contemporaries, predecessors and successors. The mixed character of this threefold realm underscores its imaginary aspect.5

But is it in the phenomenon of the trace that the ‘imaginary’ character of connectors, founding historical time, finds its most fundamental expression. The imaginative mediation operative here is inscribed in the mixed structure of the trace as sign-effect. This structure takes the form of a synthetic function involving: 1) casual inferences applied to the trace as a mark left behind, and 2) acts of interpretation directed to the specifically signifying character of the trace as something present standing for something past. The synthetic activity of ‘retracing’ embraces diverse functions of selecting, preserving, collecting and reading archival documents which serve to schematize the traces as a reinscription of lived time.

Here Ricoeur opens out the analysis of the schematizing trace to the concrete workings of the ‘historical imagination’. The imaginary character of the acts that mediate the trace is evidenced in the intellectual work of interpreting ruins, fossils, remains, monuments, museum pieces, and the like. However, these acquire the value of the trace — as agency of historical time — only when we provide ourselves, as readers, with a figure of the social and cultural context surrounding the relic that today is missing. With the expression ‘to provide ourselves with a figure of’, we again touch upon the activity of imagination.6

At this stage of the analysis Ricoeur supplements his poetics of historical narrative with an ethics of responsibility to the past — what he calls ‘the debt we owe the dead’.7 As soon as we genuinely address the question of the ‘pastness of the past’, the mediating/schematizing role of the imagination reaches a new urgency. The spontaneous ‘realism’ of the historians who lay claim to the past as it actually was (wie es eigentlich gewesen) cannot circumvent the difficult notion of ‘standing-for’. This signals the ongoing ethical claim of ‘something that happened’ — a Gegenüber no longer existing today — on the ways we retrace or reread the past. Now we encounter the ‘right of the past
as it once was' to incite and rectify our narrative reconstructions of history, reminding us of our debt to those who have lived, suffered and died – reminding us that (contra Faurisson and other revisionists) the gas ovens did exist, Nagasaki and Cambodia were bombed, show trials and gulags were inflicted on countless innocent people.

The ostensible paradox here, however, is that it should be imagination which responds to the ethical summons to respect the reality of the past. It is poetics which comes to the service of ethics as a means of recalling our debt to the dead. It is the 'imaginary' which imposes itself once more as the indispensable servant of standing-for, providing us with a figure of what was.

The imaginative process of standing-for is complex. If re-enactment is a central goal of 'historical imagination', it is not its only goal. In addition to the imaginative act of reappropriating the past as present (under the category of the Same), historical imagination also has a duty to the otherness of the past by way of expressing the moment of what-is-no-more – what is absent in the narrative act of standing-for. 'It is still the imaginary', Ricoeur argues, 'that keeps otherness from slipping into the unsayable. It is always through some transfer from Same to Other, in empathy and imagination, that the Other that is foreign is brought closer.' Thus, Ricoeur – in the tradition of Dilthey, Husserl and Gadamer – pursues the hermeneutic function of transfer by analogy; that is, the capacity of an interpreter to transport himself or herself into an alien psychic life.

It is this very transfer, moreover, that Lyotard and certain other postmodern advocates of the 'irrepresentable sublime' rule out in their critique of imagination. The following passage from Lyotard's essay, 'After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics', exemplifies this stance: 'As every presentation consists in the "forming" of the matter . . . the disaster suffered by the imagination can be understood as the sign that the forms are not relevant to the sublime sentiment. But in that case, where does the matter stand, if the forms are no longer there to make it presentable?' In the attempted subversion of imagination by devotees of the 'textual sublime', we may find not only 'Kant disfigured', but our ethical debt to the reality of what actually happened compromised.10

By contrast, what the hermeneutic recourse to analogizing imagination brings out in relation to the past-as-it-actually-was is the tropological nature of the term aswine. The as comes to assume the value of 'such as . . .' interpreted in metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. By the same token, the representative (as distinct from representational) function of historical imagination intensifies the act of 'providing ourselves with a figure of . . .. In other words, the historical past is what I would have witnessed if I had been there (just as
the other side of things is what I would see if I were standing over there rather than here). Tropology becomes the imaginary aspect of standing-for.\textsuperscript{11}

Ricoeur takes an additional step that accentuates the rapport between poetical and ethical imagination; namely, the step beyond the dated past to the specifically \textit{refigured} past. The modality of ‘figurativeness’ becomes now \textit{explicitly} that of narrative imagination. Ricoeur resolves to show: 1) how specific imaginary features, made evident in fictional narrative, come to enrich diverse imaginary mediations (calendar, trace, etc.) mentioned above, and 2) how the actual interweaving of fiction and history operates in the \textit{refiguration of time}.

Developing the metaphorical function of ‘seeing as’ into the more broadly imaginative function of ‘providing oneself with a figure of’, Ricoeur shows how the refiguration of the past in terms of quasi-intuitive fulfillment relates to history. Once we acknowledge that history is a refiguration of time, we can admit that the writing of history emulates and incorporates many types of narrative emplotment borrowed from literary practice. But what history-writing borrows from fiction-writing is not confined to the act of configuration (composition, emplotment, \textit{muthos}). It also involves—and crucially so—what Ricoeur calls the ‘representative function of the historical imagination’.\textsuperscript{12} One and the same text can, for instance, be a great work of history \textit{and} a great novel. It can relate the way things actually happened in the past and \textit{at the same time} make us see, feel and live it ‘as if’ we were there. Moreover, this ‘fiction-effect’ of history actually enhances, rather than diminishes, the project of standing-for. That is why a history text can be read as powerful evocative narrative rather than mere unreliable fantasy. Fiction can serve history as well as subvert it. The two are potential allies. Michelet’s picture of the French Revolution, for example, is also a literary work comparable with Tolstoy’s \textit{War and Peace}.

The above rests upon the supposition that the tropological/rhetorical/figural aspect of history-writing necessarily entails a fiction-effect upon the reader. As we move from configuration (text) to refiguration (reader), we understand better how the historical imagination produces an implicit pact of reading—a complicity between the narrative voice and the implied reader. The reader suspends disbelief and accords the historian the right to represent other minds.

The deployment of such novelistic strategies by historians, to place vividly before the reader’s mind some long-past event or personage, was already recognized by Aristotle in the \textit{Rhetoric} under \textit{lexis} ‘locution’—a manner 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 seeing. The danger of such ‘hallucination of presence’—easy prey to dogmatism or fundamentalism—is restricted by the critical vigilance of responsible historians, who combine strategies of presence and distance, belief and disbelief, engagement and estrangement, to produce a proper balance of ‘controlled illusion’.11

Perhaps things are not so simple, however. If critical freedom from naïve illusion is one aspect of the historical narrator’s ethical responsibility, another is readiness to refigure certain events of deep ethical intensity. While in some cases it may seem appropriate for historians to put aside strong feelings of indignation, commemoration, or compassion in order to offer an ‘objective’ explanation of how things happened, in other cases, such as Auschwitz, it would appear that the ethical neutralization proper to such setting-at-a-distance is neither possible nor desirable. The biblical watchword Zikhor, ‘Remember!’, is more appropriate in such circumstances—something Primo Levi, a survivor of the Nazi camps, made hauntingly plain in his resolve to tell the story as it happened in the most vivid fashion imaginable. The recourse to tropes and narratives to this end is motivated throughout by an ethical imperative: people must not be allowed to forget lest it happen again. As Levi puts 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.’14

In such cases, rememoration takes on an ethical character of testimony quite distinct from the triumphalist commemoration of history’s great and powerful. For if the latter often tends towards legitimating an ideology of domination, the former moves in the opposite direction—towards a felt reliving of past suffering, injustice, or horror as if we were there. The distinction is important. The tremendum horridum needs narrative imagination to plead its cause lest it slip irrevocably into oblivion. ‘Horror attaches to events that must never be forgotten’, explains Ricoeur. ‘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.’15 In such instances, the refractive powers of narrative imagination prevent abstract historiography from neutralizing injustice or explaining things away.
Narrative imagination

The role of imagination in remembering the horrible is tied to a specific function of individuation in our historical consciousness: namely, the need to respect the uniquely unique character of events such as the Holocaust, or Hiroshima, or the gulag. While historical explanation generally seeks to connect things together and see disparate events as part of a larger cohesive pattern, historical imagination is more responsive to the incomparable nature of events; it endeavors to isolate their singularity from sanitizing homogenization—from Hegel’s ‘Ruse of Reason’ as much as from Heidegger’s ‘Destiny of Techne’ (which puts gas chambers and combine harvesters into the same category).16

But Ricoeur issues a caveat here. He warns against the tension between 1) historical explanation that connects, and 2) historical imagination that singularizes, being pushed to the point of rupture. The latent conflict must not, he insists, lead to a ‘ruinous dichotomy between a history that would dissolve the event in explanation and a purely emotional retort that would dispense us from thinking the unthinkable’.17 To obviate such polarization, Ricoeur recommends that historical explanation and individuation be used to abet each other. In this scenario, the better the historical explanation the more indignant we become; the more struck we are by the narrative retelling of events, the more we strive to understand them. This is a way of saying that narrative imagination gives rise to thought (le récit donne à penser) just as thought gives rise to narrative imagination (la pensée donne à raconter).

All this amounts to endorsing the capacity of fictional narrative to provoke an illusion of quasi-presence controlled by critical distance. Without the quasi-intuitiveness of fiction, the horrible would be no more than ‘blind feeling’ (as no doubt it was, alas, for most of those who endured it at the time). The refigurative act of standing-for the past provides us with a ‘figure’ to see and to think about, to image and to respond to. ‘Fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep. The present state of literature on the Holocaust provides ample proof of this. Either one counts the cadavers or one tells the story of the victims.’18

The interweaving of fiction and history reminds us, moreover, that both narrative modes share a common origin in epic. A particular characteristic of epic is that it preserves the memory of suffering (or glory in other contexts) on the collective scale of peoples. Placed in the service of the unforgettable, narrative fiction permits historiography to live up to the task of collective memory. For history-telling to lose this testimonial vocation is for it to risk becoming an idle game of curious exotica or, worse, a value-neutral positivism of dead facts. Such
outcomes are not ethically permissible. 'There are perhaps crimes that must not be forgotten, victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration', writes Ricoeur. 'The will not to forget alone can prevent these crimes from ever occurring again.'\(^{19}\) The ethical debt to the dead calls upon the poetical power to narrate.

II

The second and final passage I analyze from Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*, Volume 3, concerns his discussion of narrative identity in his ‘Conclusions’. Ricoeur ties the question of identity to narrative by suggesting that the best response to the question ‘Who is the author or agent?’ is to tell the story of a life. The permanent identity of a person, presupposed by the designation of a proper name, is provided by the conviction that it is the same subject who perdures through its diverse acts and words between birth and death. ‘The story told tells about the “who.” And the identity of this “who” therefore itself must be a narrative identity.’\(^{20}\) Ricoeur even surmises that without recourse to narration, the problem of personal identity would be irresolvable.

He distinguishes, however, between this positive narrative identity of self (*ipse*) and a substantialist or formalist identity of sameness (*idem*). The narrative self constitutes an ongoing process of self-constancy and self-rectification which relies on poetic imagination to synthesize the different horizons of past, present and future. This self obviates the polar opposition between Same and Other to the extent that its identity as *soi-même* ‘rests on a temporal structure that conforms to the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a text.’\(^{21}\)

Developing this textual analogy, Ricoeur argues that self-identity as *ipse* (*soi-même*) can include mutability and transformation within the cohesion of one lifetime. This means that the identity of human subjects (individual or collective) is recognized as a perpetual task of reinterpretation in the light of stories we tell ourselves and others. The subject becomes the reader and writer of its own life. The task of narrative imagination runs as follows: ‘The story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. The refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told.’\(^{22}\)

Ricoeur’s stance on narrative identity receives support from a number of contemporary quarters—including recent works by Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Seyla Benhabib. Benhabib, for example, states in her book *Situating the Self* that ‘the Enlightenment
conception of the disembodied cogito no less than the empiricist illusion of a substance-like self cannot do justice to those contingent processes of socialization through which an infant becomes a person . . . capable of projecting a narrative into the world of which she is not only the author but the actor as well’. 23 Ricoeur is clearly not on his own in promoting what Benhabib terms the ‘narrative structure of personal identity’.

What particularly interests me here is the ethical import of narrative self-identity. First, it suggests that the age-old virtue of self-knowledge (first promoted by Socrates and Seneca) involves for us today not some egotistical or narcissistic ego but an examined life freed from infantile archaism and ideological dogmatism. The ethical subject of self-knowledge is purged and clarified by the ‘cathartic effects of narrative, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture. So, self-constancy refers to a self instructed by the works of a culture that it has applied to itself.’ 24

Narrative identity operates at the level of both individual and communal identity. With respect to the former, Ricoeur cites the example of psychoanalytical case-histories where the subject commits itself to a ‘talking cure’—that is, a working-through (Durcharbeitung) of unintelligible and unbearable experiences until some narrative emerges by means of which the analysand can acknowledge its self-constancy in and through change. This model of analytical working-through also applies, with variations, to the collective stories told by historians. Psychoanalysis represents an instructive laboratory for understanding narrative identity in allowing us to grasp how the ‘story of a life comes to be constituted through a series of rectifications applied to previous narratives, just as the history of a people, or a collectivity, or an institution proceeds from the series of corrections that new historians bring to their predecessors’ descriptions and explanations, and, step by step, to the legends that preceded this genuinely historiographical work’. 25 Stories proceed from stories—just as histories proceed from histories.

Subjects, individual or communal, come to imagine and know themselves in the stories they tell about themselves. By way of exemplifying this role of narrative imagination in the history of a community, Ricoeur chooses biblical Israel. He considers this case particularly applicable since few communities have been so intrinsically mobilized by the narratives they have told about themselves. It was in telling the sacred narratives foundational to its history that biblical Israel formed the historical community that bears its name. In a typical hermeneutic circle we discover an historical Jewish community drawing its identity from the reinterpretation of those texts it has itself created.
The circle is not confined, however, to case-histories of individuals or collective histories of peoples. It is a basic narrative structure of human-being-in-the-world. Before we ever use narrative imagination to configure our lives into meaningful stories, we have already used it to prefigure our lives in terms of symbolically structured and temporally schematized action. The completion of the hermeneutic circle with the refiguring of time by narrative (writing and reading) is, according to Ricoeur, a ‘wholesome’ one. Refiguration (the third mimetic relation) is characterized by a narrative identity ‘stemming from the endless rectification of a previous narrative by a subsequent one’. Narrative identity proposes a ‘poetic resolution’ to a hermeneutic circle. It recognizes that life is in quest of narrative just as narrative is in quest of life.

But the picture is not yet complete. Poetical resolutions also have consequences (and not always positive ones) for ethics. It must be conceded that if narrative imagination does indeed provide the subject with a structure of self-constancy, its fictional power also exposes the subject to imaginative variations of self and other that can easily destabilize narrative identity. The recognition that self-identity presupposes narrative imagination requires, accordingly, the corollary recognition that narrative identity is something which perpetually makes and unmakes itself. In short, narrative identity poses itself ultimately not only as an answer but as a question. That is why we will never cease to be puzzled by the age-old interrogative challenge – ‘Who do you say that I am?’ There is a fundamental fluidity built into the principle of narrative identity by virtue of the fact that it is founded on narrative imagination.

At this crucial point in his thesis Ricoeur suggests adding an additional spoke to the wheel of self-identity – one last argument to negotiate the shifting subsoil of narrative imagination. Admitting that the imaginative component of narrative generally inhabits worlds and minds foreign to ourselves, Ricoeur proposes this be curtailed by a countervailing component of ‘will’ that impels us to ethical commitment. ‘Narrative exercises imagination more than the will’, continues Ricoeur, particularly in the moment of stasis when we submit to the ‘as-if’ illusion of the text; but reading also includes a moment of impetus which summons the will to act – to embark on the return journey from text to action. This occurs when a reader decides to respond to the persuasive call of the text by saying ‘Here I stand!’ Citing Lévinas’s example of promise-keeping, Ricoeur confirms that narrative identity is not equivalent to ‘true self-constancy except through this decisive moment, which makes ethical responsibility the highest factor in self-constancy’.
The implication here is that narrative imagination needs to be supplemented by narrative will if an ethical notion of self-identity, constant in its commitments and promises to others, is to be sustained. As it happens, narrativity does carry within itself a certain evaluative or prescriptive dimension. The strategy of persuasion imposed by narrators on readers is never completely ethically neutral; it induces a re-evaluation of one’s world. ‘Change your life!’ was the call of the Grecian statue to the readers of the poet Rilke; and Ricoeur would seem to agree that most narrative works share something of this summons.

So here at last, on the threshold of ethical action, Ricoeur counsels narrative imagination to seek further courts of appeal for the ultimate safeguarding of justice. Narrative can bring us to the door of ethical action but it cannot lead us through. It can do so much, but no more. Ricoeur concludes that while narrative can indeed make claim to ethical justice, it finally ‘belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multiple proposals of ethical justice brought forth by reading. It is at this point that the notion of narrative identity encounters its limit and has to link up with the non-narrative components in the formation of an acting subject.”

III

A certain postmodern strand in philosophy – extending from Bataille and Foucault to Lyotard and Derrida – has, I believe, accorded priority to poetics over ethics. This may sometimes lead to an aesthetic of ‘deliberate irresponsibility’, as has been said of Foucault, or to one of indecisive ‘indifference’, as has been suggested of Derrida. Whatever the accuracy of such claims, they betray an anxiety that poetics left to itself can be a dangerous game. If it is true, as Ricoeur says, that imagination knows no censure in itself, then the summons of responsibility to others has to come from beyond itself – that is, from others. What narrative permits is the structuring of imagination in a way which propels it beyond its egotistical circle to a relation of analogy, empathy, or apperception (Paarung) with others. This involves an ‘enlarged mentality’ of imagining oneself in the place of everybody else – a mentality which Hannah Arendt also considers essential to ethical judgment. She writes:

The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and
myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. From this potential agreement judgment derives its specific validity. . . . It needs the special presence of others ‘in whose place’ it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all.  

Arendt, like Ricoeur, sees this ‘representative’ mode of ethical deliberation as ‘liberation from one’s own private interests’, but not necessarily as an exit from one’s own sphere of identity. “The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would think and feel if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking.” The issue, therefore, it seems to me, is only partially resolved. Others’ points of view are still being represented ‘in my mind’ and need not always challenge my sense of self-containment.

To state the problem differently: this movement of representation/apperception, while potentially ethical, is still directed from the inside out, from the self towards the other. It opens us to the other but is not necessarily summoned by, or ‘hostaged’ to, the other (to use Levinas’s language). In this scenario the self is still in charge, though willing to imagine itself in another’s shoes. Thus understood, it is susceptible to the suspicion that it may be responding to the other less as other per se than as another self, an alter ego (a position Husserl never got beyond in the fifth of his Cartesian Meditations). While this may indeed constitute an act of altruistic ascesis or kenosis — wherein the self flows from itself towards the other through the free variation of imagination — it remains a unilateral declaration of intent. It is coming from the imaginative self towards the other rather than permitting the other to impinge upon the imaginative self. In this sense, it could be said that narrative imagination opens us to the foreign world of others by enabling us to tell or hear other stories, but it can never be sure of escaping the hermeneutic circle of interpretation, which ultimately strives to translate the foreign into the familiar, the discordant into the concordant, the different into the analogous, the other into the self (or, at best, the enlarged ‘representative’ self).

If we accept these lines of argument, Ricoeur is right to set a limit to the power of narrative imagination — the limit, in this instance, being the ethical limit of responsible action. People can do what they like in their fantasies; but they cannot act with impunity in the real world. L’imaginaire ne connaît pas de censure; but my responsibility to others does. Poetic license applies only to poetics, not to the ethical world of
action beyond the text. Those who think otherwise, or simply refuse to acknowledge the distinction, have been known to make grave errors of ethical judgment – from Céline and Pound to Heidegger and Foucault.\footnote{34}

While I do not propose, by way of conclusion, to reimpose a dichotomy between poetics and ethics, I do believe we need to observe certain border controls. Otherwise the schematizing–synthesizing–fictionalizing impulses of narrative imagination run the risk of reducing otherness to selfhood (individual or collective). So doing, they run the risk of overlooking the primary principle of ethical responsibility to the other as other-than-self. I would agree, therefore, with Ricoeur that a poetics of narrative imagination is in many respects a condition of ethics, for (1) providing a base for a responsible self (with a perduring identity capable of making commitments, promises and pledges), and (2) transcending the self towards possible or alien worlds. But if such a poetics is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient one. The condition for ethics only becomes sufficient when the other breaks across the narrative of the self and asks, ‘Where are you?’ – and the self responds, ‘Here I am!’

'Où êtes-vous? Me voici!'

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Notes


4 ibid., p. 183.
5 ibid.
6 ibid., p. 184.
7 ibid.
8 ibid.
where the author claims that the interrelationship between fiction and politics can constitute a certain discourse of ‘mythopoeis’ governed by a ‘logic of aesthetic-political immanence’ that, at worst, degenerates into a politics of nationalist aestheticism which National Socialism is the most poisonous historical example. Including in this ‘mythopoeis’, or self-fashioning *technē*, such figures as Nietzsche, Junger, and Heidegger (as reader of Trakl), Lacoue-Labarthe identifies it as a tendency to see the ‘political as the sphere of the fictioning of beings and communities’ (p. 71). See also Lacoue-Labarthe’s *Heidegger, Art and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).


11 ibid.

12 ibid., p. 186.

13 ibid.


17 ibid., p. 188.

18 ibid.

19 ibid., p. 189.

20 ibid., p. 246.

21 ibid.

22 ibid.


ibid., p. 248.
ibid.
ibid., p. 249; emphasis added.
ibid.
See James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 377. Foucault himself never hesitated to subordinate an ethics of responsibility to an 'aesthetics of existence', whose primary fidelity is to the 'care of the self'. See, for example, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 343. The above critique of Foucault distinguishes between the ethics of his personal life — which does not concern my argument — and the ethical implications of his 'aesthetic' readings of, for example, political violence or popular tribunals. It is also worth considering here the argument of a practicing artist like David Putnam, that contemporary art (in this case film) has profound ethical and political consequences for authors and the public alike. See *The Moral Imagination* (Coleraine: University of Ulster, 1992) for example, his belief that 'to have become a non-combatant in the battle for the world's "moral imagination" will, in my opinion, eventually be seen as something of an historical tragedy' (p. 10); or, his two conclusions: 'I have to believe in the possibility of a morally responsible community, one in which the artist, the communicator, can both function and be encouraged to find the very best within him or herself' (p. 19); and 'Artists, and those who work with them, have a considerable moral responsibility to carefully select projects which attune themselves to the needs of their audience, projects which at the very least offer them a sense of values' (p. 23).


ibid. Crucial ethical and political aspects of this intersubjective 'social' mode of 'representative' judgment are explored by Ricoeur in such texts as *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); *Du texte à
Narrative Imagination

