

Paul Ricoeur, 1913–2005

Another great French philosopher has passed away. On 20 May 2005, Paul Ricoeur died in Châtenay-Malabry, Hauts-de-Seine, west of Paris. He was born ninety-two years earlier in Valence on 27 February 1913, and quickly orphaned at the slaughter of the Marne in 1915. He died of natural causes, said his son Marc, after an illness of a few months.

One of Ricoeur's last appearances was in November 2004, when he was joint winner with Jaroslav Pelikan of the John W. Kluge Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Humanities and Social Sciences from the Library of Congress. Ricoeur's intellectual biography is as stellar as that of any of the great French thinkers, although he had to overcome some hurdles. He studied at the University of Rennes, was a schoolteacher for a while, did his time (like Althusser and others) in a German prison camp for most of World War II and was passed up for Michel Foucault for a chair at the Collège de France. *Freud and Philosophy* (1965; English translation 1970) raised the ire of Lacan and his cohorts for not mentioning Lacan, and Althusser's students took aim at him for a while as well. But none of this affected his career. By 1948 he had begun a series of lecturing posts and professorships at the Sorbonne, Nanterre, Chicago, Yale, Columbia, Geneva, Montreal and Louvain.

Ricoeur's first book, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence*, written with Mikel Dufrenne, appeared in 1947. He subsequently published more than thirty books, most of which have been translated into English, including *Freedom and Nature* (1950; 1966), *History and Truth* (1955; 1965), *Fallible Man* (1960; 1965), *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960; 1967), *Husserl* (1967 – an English-language collection of essays from the 1950s), *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975; 1978), *Time and Narrative* (3 volumes, 1983–85; 1984–88) and *Oneself as Another* (1990; 1992). As an octogenarian he continued to write as prolifically as ever. Late in 2004, the mammoth *Memory, History and Forgetting* appeared, dealing with the conditions of possibility for historical writing and moral forgiveness. *The Course of Recognition* will be published later this year. *Critique and Commitment*, a set of interviews dealing with Ricoeur's life and philosophy, appeared in French in 1995, and in English three years later.

Ricoeur saw himself primarily as a critical phenomenologist, but in the finest tradition of philosophy he intervened in numerous fields, including linguistics, psychoanalysis, sociology, history, literary theory, law, politics and biblical studies. Yet this urbane and gentle philosopher always seemed to be running quietly behind the scenes while the likes of Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Irigaray and Kristeva stirred up hornets' nests of committed followers and equally committed opponents. What, then, might Ricoeur have to offer the more radical elements of philosophy, especially in a country where one's position was usually determined by the French Communist Party, whether as an ideologue, a former member or indeed an opponent of some sort? Ricoeur, of course, had had his time in the firing of line of the Althusserians, but he was also an advocate of reforms in the French university system in the 1960s. He was involved in setting up the University of Nanterre in 1967 and became dean of the College of Letters. He was a pacifist, supporter of *L'Esprit*, and vocal objector to French policy all the way from the Algerian wars to the Bosnian war of the 1990s.

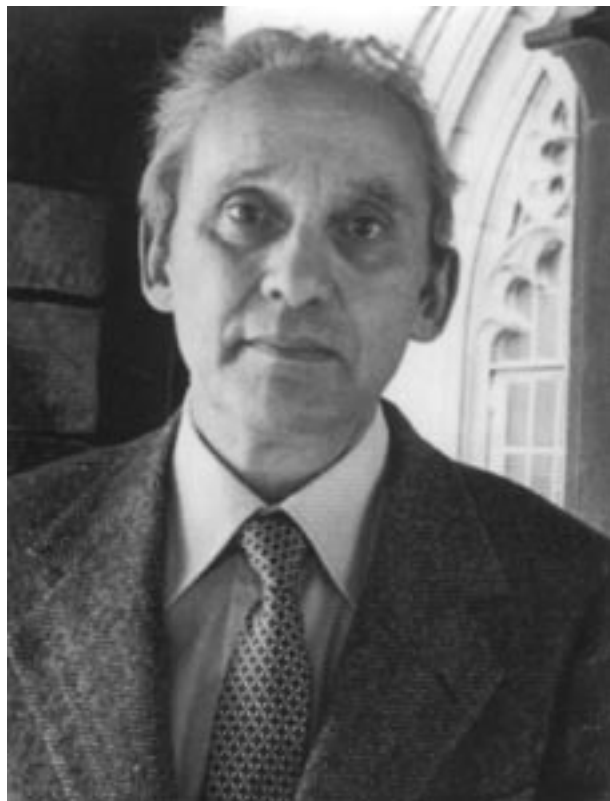
Yet any good liberal (with a small 'l') may lay claim to such credentials. In January 2004 he told *Le Monde*: 'If I had to lay out my vision of the world... I would say: given

the place where I was born, the culture I received, what I read, what I learned [and] what I thought about, there exists for me a result that constitutes, here and now, the best thing to do... I call it the action that suits.'

Ricoeur's contribution begins with his work in the theory of interpretation but, for me at least, it finds its basis in a little-explored field of his writings, namely biblical studies. For many this is an element of Ricoeur's work that is either best forgotten or shows up his inherently conservative nature. But in a predominantly Roman Catholic France, however cultural such a Catholicism might have been, Ricoeur was a Protestant, coming from the long minority tradition of Huguenots. Indeed, in a new geopolitical context, Ricoeur's work in this area may have a new resonance. In the United States fundamentalist Christians who assume erroneously that the Bible is inerrant have the ear of the president and a disproportionate influence on domestic and foreign policy. In Australia, they form a powerful lobby group in the inner circles of government, touting the ridiculous agenda of 'biblical values'. In Israel, ultra-conservative Jews generate the major tension in Israeli society between religious and secular Jews, pushing for a raft of measures that includes the dispossession of Palestinians. And in Islamic nation-states, conservative and literalist Muslim leaders and governments seek to enforce a social model based on the Koran and the Hebrew Bible.

Few sufficiently recognize the place of the Bible and biblical studies in Ricoeur's work. It peaked in the late 1970s and then again in the late 1990s. To begin with, in *Freud and Philosophy*, we find the 'first' major exploration of the hermeneutics of suspicion and recovery (conveniently forgetting Ernst Bloch). Attributing such a hermeneutics to the three great 'masters of suspicion' – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – Ricoeur nonetheless saw the greatness of Freud's work in its acute sense of the limits of the hermeneutical problematic. Two other works from the period, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1969; 1974) and *Interpretation Theory* (1976), proceeded to cut a new path through the old hermeneutical problem of dealing with a text that is both distant in terms of time and place and part of the present of interpretation: the dialectic between the distancing of the text and the appropriation of the reader. I can't help but read this as in some sense one long meditation on the Bible. For the conflict of interpretations makes much sense for critics working on a text that had almost two millennia of exegetical effort, and in some cases more than two millennia. Ricoeur seems always to search for the moment when a text far removed from our own horizon becomes part of that horizon, as if the world in front of the text was the one for which we too were aiming.

The radical possibilities of such an approach was not realized by Ricoeur, and it was up to liberation theologians such as J. Severino Croatto, in *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Liberation* from 1981, to apply Ricoeur's theory to the Bible and find a liberating hermeneutic in the narrative of Exodus. That great moment of liberation (no matter how fictional, although Croatto liked to see a grain of historical truth in it) becomes ours at crucial politico-theological turning points.



Yet this was still only the first step. Any theory of interpretation worth its salt requires three steps: a workable theory for dealing with the text in question, a moment that enables one to deal with its continued effect, and a strategy that is able to incorporate or at least make sense of the various methods that have been used to interpret such a text. One might develop such a theory as much for Marx's or Lenin's texts as any others. In this early work Ricoeur worked hard at the first two – the text and its continued effect. Hence the dialectic of distancing and appropriation. But what of the third step, one that accounts for the many other methods and approaches that have been used?

Here we need to pick up the Ricoeur of the 1980s and 1990s. *Time and Narrative* is at once a massive labour of critical appropriation and a major philosophical work in its own right. Ricoeur had been interested in the philosophical problem of history since the early 1950s, as an aspect of the phenomenological problem of meaning. However, what began as a concern with knowledge and action broadened into an existential and ontological concern with the narrative structure of time itself. This involved a complex mediation of the history of the philosophical aporetics of time, since Plato, with the poetics of narrative, in both its European and Anglo-American forms. It is in the search by individuals and communities for narrative identities, Ricoeur concluded, that the philosophical aporia of time (the 'mystery of time') is lived.

In the 1990s, we find Ricoeur in the strangest of company, among the so-called 'theological turn' of phenomenology, criticized by Dominique Janicaud (2000) and championed by the likes of Michel Henri, the old warhorse Jean-Luc Marion and the relative newcomer Jean-Louis Chrétien. Here, in the midst of Roman Catholics, we find a Ricoeur who finds problematic the enthusiasm for unearthing a more theological Heidegger, for theology and phenomenology are by no means the most peaceful partners.

I myself am particularly interested in one of Ricoeur's last texts, *Thinking Biblically*, which he wrote with André LaCocque (2003). They select key texts throughout the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, from Genesis to the Song of Songs. LaCocque offers this older eye while Ricoeur provides some philosophico-theological spin. It is a curious text on a number of counts, and not one that you would pick up first for some radical insights. But what is interesting about this text is the way Ricoeur develops his agenda from the 1970s. He refuses to tip his hat to any school of interpretation, cutting his own path that somehow steps back and takes a very different line. Here we find an effort to develop a mode of interpretation that accounts for the other methods that have been used and may well be used.

To my mind he asks the right questions, although somehow coming up with the wrong answers. For he assumes that the normal context for a text is its community – that is, in the case of the Bible, the believing community, or the Church. Unfortunately, the end run of such a position is that the Bible appears as the inseparable twin of theology, the fount and final resting point of any theological endeavour. And yet the promise of his approach is that such a community now stretches well past its conventional meaning, for what we get is a community of commentary that brings together text and reader.

This is the direction in which I would want to push, for what we find if we strip away the theological underpinnings is the beginnings of a method that would allow us to read any text without turning such interpretation into some form of museum-like preservation. But it requires a more sustained consideration of the intersection of the three elements of text, influence and metacommentary than Ricoeur himself offered.

For this, and for the extraordinary range and depth of his learning, Ricoeur is worth reading and rereading with care.

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