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POETICS AND LITERARY CRITICISM. REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF NARRATIVITY OF PAUL RICOEUR

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Abstract || The present article attempts to read the itinerary suggested by Ricoeur, which starts with the appearance of the text, and finishes with its interpretation as evidence of the narrative structure of human experience. Having done this, we propose to demonstrate that the literary work does not represent an event isolated from reality, but its hermeneutic moment, i.e. a way to think about and catalyze experiences that give way to certain existential courses. In the second place, together with Ricoeur, we attempt to read the influence of Linguistics and Hermeneutics on 20th century literary thought, and the recovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* carried out by both schools.

Keywords || Ricoeur | Poetics | Narrative | Text | Form | Reality | Hermeneutics.

Se puede intentar negar el problema mismo y considerar como no pertinente la cuestión del impacto de la literatura sobre la experiencia cotidiana. Pero entonces, por una parte, se ratifica paradójicamente el positivismo que generalmente se está combatiendo, a saber: el prejuicio de que sólo es real el dato que puede observarse empíricamente y describirse científicamente, y por otra, se encierra la literatura en un mundo en sí y se rompe la punta subversiva que lanza contra el orden moral y social. Se olvida que la ficción es precisamente lo que hace del lenguaje ese supremo peligro del que Walter Benjamín, tras Hölderlin, habla con temor y admiración.

P. Ricoeur, *Tiempo y narración*.

One of the greatest contributions of Paul Ricoeur to literary criticism is the reconsideration of the literary text as “the” indispensable event of literary criticism. There may be many communicative instances without the text, but the communicative instance that we call literature is impossible without the text. The awareness of the text as a “form” has already been mentioned at the beginning of the 20th century by the Formalist school, and since then it has determined a fundamental distinction when dealing with the literary work: the restricted distinction between fiction and reality. Within the artistic avant-garde context, fiction becomes a subversive instrument of reality. However, this phenomenon typical of the literary fact –the awareness of form– is extrapolated by linguistics to any other communicative act; the controversial relation between fiction and reality becomes a tacit agreement. The distinction between language [langue] and speech [parole], presented by F. de Saussure on the *Cours de linguistique générale*, leads to the subsequent structuralist conception of language as a system of signs to be completely objectified in view of achieving a specific linguistic competence. Ricoeur warns that conceiving the language in this way is extreme and may lead to the dissolution of the horizon of reflection for literary criticism; the literary work, inside the “market of communication”, would stop being an event and would become one of the many formulations already included in the language code. In this way, the artistic fact only constitutes the accessory of a reality specifically established by the scientific fact. Ricoeur’s contribution to 20th century literary criticism comes up from the recovery of the awareness of the form which mediates between fiction and reality, but at the same time, it is aware that this distinction applies to the artistic and the scientific discourse to the same extent; it is aware that all possible theoretical considerations on the text and language have the only objective of assuring a horizon of reflection which belongs not only to speculation but also to everyday experience.

Ricoeur presents this awareness of the form as something more than a mere distinction of categories between fiction and reality. Ricoeur does not think of the text just as something “beside” reality, limited to a particular reflection; the text is the evidence that human experience is determined by the phenomenon of time:

Cada acaecimiento discursivo es, en efecto, un acaecimiento evanescente; pero su sentido permanece. Por ello, dicho sentido puede ser fijado mediante la escritura. El sentido del discurso y la intención de su emisor dejan de solaparse en ese momento, y el destino del primero se separa del segundo, como veremos posteriormente al analizar la noción de «discurso» como texto y obra. (Ricoeur 1999: 49)

This fragment, from an article published in 1978, states the flow of Ricoeur’s reflection on the text, which goes from *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975) to *Time and Narrative* (1983-85). From his consideration of the metaphor as a heuristic instrument –compared to the function of the “model” in scientific discourse–, narrativity is explained as the way to “articulate” human experience, determined by the phenomenon of time. Although metaphor and narrative belong to different spheres –metaphor to “tropes”, narrative to “genres”–, both are part of the same sphere of language as regards innovation and both come from the conception of the phrase as the minimal language unit. Based on the distinction of language levels carried out by E. Benveniste, in which at a semiotic level the word is understood as the sign of a code, and at a semantic level as inseparable from another word –being the phrase, in this case, the basic discursive unit– Ricoeur raises the possibility of understanding the metaphor not as a mere “substitution” of meaning but as a “tension” of meaning. Narrative, as fiction, is also presented as a tension of meaning against conventional reality.

The innovation of language, however, is not placed “next to” a pre-established reality. On the contrary, it spreads along the arch that goes from denotation to connotation, revealing the poetic character of each and every human action. The text, then, as poem or “done thing”, must be correctly placed in the horizon of experience to overcome the misleading disjunction between fiction and reality. “Hay que equilibrar, por tanto, el axioma de la clausura del universo de los signos con una mayor atención a la función principal del lenguaje, que consiste en decir. En contraste con dicha clausura, esa función constituye una apertura” (Ricoeur, 1999: 46).

Mario J. Valdés, in his book *La interpretación abierta: introducción a la hermenéutica literaria contemporánea*, states that hermeneutics is the most rewarding foundation for literary criticism, since, in contrast to historicist theories, formalist theories and deconstruction, it assures

the continuity between text and reality as communicative act. The timeless subject-object diagram is insufficient for the interpretation of the work of art, since within this diagram, the experience of time as a communicable experience is abolished in favour of an irrevocable manner of understanding; this presupposes the existence of an object completely isolated from the time process that makes us human beings. “[...] las bases de una hermenéutica fenomenológica se derivan del cuestionamiento de la relación sujeto-objeto y es a partir de este cuestionamiento que observamos por primera vez que la idea de objetividad presupone una relación que comprende al objeto supuestamente aislado” (Valdés, 1995: 64). In order to interpret a text it is not necessary to break the hermeneutic circle that is generated between the “before” and the “after” the work because in Ricoeur’s approach, the text is presented as a “mediation”. The knowledge of reality provided by the fiction of the text is presented by Ricoeur as a “learning process”, that is to say, a knowledge which is not exhausted in the object, but is permanently updated in the shared experience.

In chapter I on the First Part of *Time and Narrative I*, Ricoeur presents the aporia of the experience of time formulated by St. Augustine in his book *Confessions XI* as the starting point for the questioning of narrativity. The aporia of time opens the world of fiction because it interrupts the supposedly un-disturbed sequence of reality (*quid est enim tempus? si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio*). This aporia rises from the contradictory character of a knowledge which, when becoming explicit, also becomes non-knowledge. According to St. Augustine, the experience of time is defined by the *intention* and the *distentio animi*: the “tension” of human action displayed in the project and the memory. How to overcome the circularity of human knowledge, if even when it emerges as the object of knowledge, it is always immersed in the indetermination of the temporal experience? However, this human knowledge which circulates between fiction and reality opens at the same time the only possibility of “understanding”.

As a possible answer to the aporia of time, Ricoeur employs the concept of *mimesis* raised by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (chapter II on the First Part of *Time and Narrative I*). The Aristotelian *mimesis* is a *mimesis* of human actions (*mímesis tôn pragmatôn*), not a static imitation of reality, as the classicists cycle defined it. Through *mimesis* men “produce” (*poieîtai*) their first knowledge (*tàs mathêseis*) (*Poetics*, 1448b). The Aristotelian *mimesis*, as Ricoeur points out, consists of a “mimetic activity” that defines the mode of accessing reality and constitutes the sphere of all human production (*poiêmata*), because “[...] el tiempo se hace tiempo humano en la medida en que se articula en un modo narrativo, y la narración alcanza su plena significación cuando se convierte en una condición de la existencia

temporal” (Ricoeur, 1987: 117). On the other hand, the reflection of literary criticism, considered as hermeneutics of the text, consists in “[...] reconstruir el conjunto de operaciones por las que una obra se levanta sobre el fondo opaco del vivir, del obrar y del sufrir, para ser dada por el autor a un lector que la recibe y así cambia su obrar” (Ricoeur, 1987: 118). Consequently, in the concept of narrativity, within the metaphor theory, literary creation is not considered an activity parallel to real life, but its ethical instance, in the sense that it constantly highlights a suitable access to the interpretative circle of reality: “[...] seguimos, pues, el paso de un tiempo prefigurado a otro refigurado por la mediación de uno configurado” (Ricoeur, 1987: 119).

The switch from one time to another through the poetic mediation of language is what allows the appropriation of time, representing in this way not an abstract succession of indifferent moments but a temporal, articulated and communicable experience. Ricoeur associates these three temporal moments to three structural moments in Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis*. Prefiguration and refiguration refer to “before” and “after” the text: each and every narration has its roots in the pre-understanding of the world of action, and it is only in the return to the time of acting and suffering that it is fully developed. Prefiguration corresponds to the first moment of the *mimesis*, *mimesis I* according to Ricoeur. All human actions “move” in a certain degree of understanding of the world that, without being necessarily explicit, in-forms us about what we must do, what we should begin or stop doing. At this point of analysis, Ricoeur refers to the concept of “intratemporality” (*Innerzeitigkeit*), coined by Heidegger in chapter IV on the Second Section of *Being and Time*. In the Heideggerian conception, time is not something that is “there” like some other object: time is “temporized” every time –it becomes time- in every act. “Intratemporality” corresponds to the time that is temporized in everyday tasks, and is determined by the natural cycles of day and night, sowing and harvesting... as Ricoeur points out, it is the time of the “works and days”. This time is already determined by the calendar. However, even if it is a predetermined time, it is a significant one and must always be interpreted. It is the time that appears “within” the significant order of the world and that originates a “semantics of action”.

According to Ricoeur, the tragic *páthos* analyzed by Aristotle in *Poetics*, alludes to this first mimetic moment. To Aristotle, the tragic action comes from a change of fortune (*metabasis*). Within the poetic configuration of tragedy, this change of fortune is carried out through peripeteia, or peripety (*peripéteia*), revelation or recognition (*anagnôrisis*), and a pathetic event (*páthos*). These constitute the three parts of the mythos, considered from an ethical point of view

(Poetics, 1452a-b). Although these parts –as *mythos*– belong to the second moment of *mimesis*, the moment of configuration or literary fiction, they are determined by a change of fortune that constitutes all experience of time. In the Augustinian conception of time as *intentio* and *distentio animi* –starting point of Ricoeur’s reflection– the passing of time is considered a permanent change of fortune. In this way, even when we are immersed in everyday tasks, if we did not have a certain notion of the changes operating inside us and if we did not grant them a meaning, we would not be able to feel sympathies or antipathies for a determined process presented in a narrative configuration. The difference lies in that the world of fiction constitutes the reflexivity of a significant action:

[...] la poética recurre continuamente a la ética, aun cuando aconseje la suspensión de cualquier juicio moral o su inversión irónica. El propio proyecto de neutralidad presupone la cualidad originariamente ética de la acción anterior a la ficción. Esta misma cualidad ética no es más que un corolario del carácter principal de la acción: estar desde siempre mediatizada simbólicamente. (Ricoeur, 1987: 127)

Therefore, fiction is always formed from a semantics of action, but it effects a change that introduces the second structural moment of *mimesis*: the configuration of events. The starting point for this description is the Aristotelian definition of *mythos* as an “the composition of actions” (*systasis tôn pragmatôn*) (*Poetics*, 1450b). The *mythos* is not unitary because it describes the time as a whole, but because it offers the possibility of configuring into one plot the many things that happen to us. In Ricoeur’s analysis, the *mimesis II* corresponds to the necessity of configuring in language the prefigurative time of everyday actions. “[...] la construcción de la trama es la operación que extrae de la simple sucesión la configuración” (Ricoeur, 1987: 136). The simple succession is the comprehension of time from the things we deal with: the day and the night. Properly human time is the encounter of a past and a future in a present loaded with or lacking meaning. This brings about the necessity of a configuration of events through language, and in this necessity the historicity of temporal experience becomes evident.

For the Heideggerian phenomenology of time, “historicity” (*Geshichtlichkeit*) marks the step from “intratemporality” –the immersed time of everyday efforts– to “temporality”: understanding time as a transcendental horizon of human evolution (chapter V on the Second Section of *Being and Time*). Ricoeur highlights the distinction between history and the fictional story: both are time configurations, but the first one constitutes a chronological narration while the latter an episodic narration. However, Heidegger’s concept contains what Ricoeur calls the “crossed reference” between both discourses. Historicity does not refer only to history as the objective

knowledge of time –*Historie*, in German, and according to Heidegger constitutes a moment derived from the *Geschichtlichkeit*–; historicity, as configuring moment of discourse, has de meaning of “telling” something, only because the event that has taken place is meaningful to whoever is telling it and also concerns whoever is listening to it. As J. E. Rivera points out in a note of his *Being and Time* translation (p. 496), the word *Geschichtlichkeit* derives from the German verb *geschehen* which means “to take place”. History as ‘event taking place’ is man himself in an action of significance. The narrativity typical of this action, as Ricoeur points out, is the one that demands a specific temporal configuration, whether chronological or episodic, since “[...] al mediatizar los dos polos del acontecimiento y de la historia, la construcción de la trama aporta a la paradoja (del tiempo) una solución: el propio acto poético” (Ricoeur, 1987: 138).

However, once the necessity of the act of configuration as mediation between the event and history has been justified, we must ask ourselves in which way the poem –not as an act but as a thing– can return to the course of time. As we pointed out before, in the Heideggerian conception of time, historicity marks the change from a time lost between the things in the world to a time projected as the horizon of action. This horizon, in the same way a visual horizon allows us to see an object, constitutes the possibility of each particular action within the significant plot of the world, and it follows from the third moment of *mimesis*: refiguration. The time of reality is not an ever-static element in the text’s fiction; on the contrary, it goes through fiction and becomes a project only attainable in the refiguration of that same reality. “[...] la obra escrita es un esbozo para la lectura; el texto, en efecto, entraña vacíos, lagunas, zonas de indeterminación e incluso, como el Ulises de Joyce, desafía la capacidad del lector para configurar él mismo la obra que el autor parece querer desfigurar con malicioso regocijo” (Ricoeur 1987: 152).

The *mimesis III*, according to Ricoeur, is present in the Aristotelian concept of *kátharsis*. *Kátharsis* is a medical term that refers to the healing of an illness, associated by Aristotle to the experience of tragedy. The *kátharsis* in tragedy is described as the change from a “state of illness” to a “state of health” through fear and compassion (*di’eléou kai phóbou peráinousa tén tón toióútôn pathêmátôn kátharsin*) (Poetics, 1449b); this change in the context of the Greek *pólis* is described as going from ignorance to knowledge, and constitutes the guarantee of the citizen’s freedom. By making use of a concept that may seem inappropriate for literary criticism terminology, Aristotle manifests that the object of study does not exhaust itself in scientific analysis. The concept of *mimesis* cannot be reduced to a veritable comparison among the fiction of the text

and the reality of actions. This is so because as much as the tragic *páthos* cannot be understood but from the ethical character of the action previous to the fiction, the *kátharsis* generates a post-fiction action which makes evident and expresses the freedom of men. This essentially poetic action is the constant refiguration of reality.

In the third part of the analysis, Ricoeur refers to the postulates of two schools of literary criticism in the second half of the 20th century. “El texto sólo se hace obra en la interacción de texto y receptor. Sobre este fondo común se destacan las dos aproximaciones diferentes: la del acto de lectura y la de la estética de la recepción” (Ricoeur, 1987: 152). Later, Ricoeur asserts addressing W. Iser and R. Jauss’ reflections, that for both theories: “[...] el texto es un conjunto de instrucciones que el lector individual o el público ejecutan de forma pasiva o creadora” (Ricoeur, 1987: 152).

Reconfiguration, as a creative act of a reader who is willing to be modified and modify their reality shared in the historical experience of time, closes the hermeneutical circle which starts again when returning to the busy time of everyday events. However, this circle is not a vicious one in which we are closed in, since it opens up a space for action, where fiction and reality constitute the line of the horizon where the experience of time opens up and results in a communicative experience. Consequently, it becomes evident that we are not confined to the objective and unchangeable world of an isolated subject, and that, as Heidegger highlights, it is not necessary to break that circle: what must be assured, though, is a suitable access to the circle. According to Ricoeur this access is derived from the inherent narrativity of temporal experience, as long as, “the poetics of narrativity responds and corresponds to the poetics of temporality”.

As we have seen in this last section, Ricoeur carries out a synthesis between Aristotle’s reflection –which initiates the critical consideration of the text– and the current reflection of two schools of literary criticism.

Nevertheless, without Iser and Jauss’s considerations on the crucial role of the reader in literary fiction, Ricoeur would possibly not have been able to describe the Aristotelian *kátharsis* as the way in which the text’s fiction returns to the temporal process through the reader. In the same way, without the Formalist contributions at the beginning of the 20th century and the Structuralist school, he would possibly not have discovered in Aristotle’s concept of *mythos* the notion of “configuration” of the temporal experience. As a background, without the analysis of St. Augustine’s aporia of time and Heidegger’s concept of “temporality”, Ricoeur would possibly not have been able

to justify the literary text as ethical instance of human evolution. In this way, Ricoeur's reflection marks a fundamental moment in literary criticism of the 20th century, since it brings back the historical horizon of a reflection which has always belonged and will always belong to the experience of a community. At the same time, it makes evident that the different schools will never definitely go beyond one another, but that all of them constitute an intellectual tissue where the literary work always lies for a new interpretation.

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