

William C. Dowling

Ricoeur on Time and Narrative: An Introduction to Temps et Récit.

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An introduction to the work of any thinker faces two challenges: 1) it has to be short enough not to divert the reader too much from the original; 2) it has to be long enough to say something worthwhile about the book. *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative* strikes just the right balance by providing a succinct and substantive presentation of Ricoeur's argument in *Time and Narrative*.

The overall aim of the book, as Dowling puts it, is 'to make the key concepts of Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* available to readers who may have felt bewildered by the twists and turns of the argument' (ix). In addition to targeting that audience, I suspect that this book will also be welcomed by teachers and scholars. Teachers of Ricoeur's work will appreciate Dowling's ability to contextualize Ricoeur's engagement with a wide range of his contemporaries, while scholars are likely to turn to it as a valuable reference point for their own engagements with specific issues in Ricoeur studies.

The book is comprised of six chapters of roughly equal length. While Dowling might have opted to divide these chapters in accordance with the sections that structure the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*, his focus instead is on the analysis of key concepts. Each chapter thus addresses a specific concept within Ricoeur's three volume project: 'Mimesis', 'Time', 'Narrativity', 'Semantics of Action', 'Poetics of History', 'Poetics of Fiction'. An appendix includes Dowling's translation of an interview that François Ewald conducted with Ricoeur in 2000. Its great advantage, if nothing else, is that it allows Dowling to proceed without having to retell the long and well-worn path leading up to Ricoeur's book.

One might not have pegged Dowling to undertake this task, as his research focuses primarily on 18th century British literature and early American literature. But, he did work alongside Ricoeur for some time at the National Humanities Center in 1979-1980, where Ricoeur was preparing some of the material that would become *Time and Narrative*. Not only is Dowling familiar with the literature and literary theory that would come to form a large part of *Time and Narrative*, but he has also taught this work in seminars with undergraduate students, and for this reason, he is attuned to the difficulties that students will face in approaching this work. Such difficulties do not come from linguistic differences or obscure jargon. Instead, Dowling rightly perceives that they stem from the remoteness of theoretical debates that took place between figures who are no longer part of the standard preparation of students today. Introducing students to Ricoeur's work, then, requires leading them into the world of its author and the theoretical debates that shaped his time. Chapter 2 ('Time') and Chapter 3 ('Narrativity') perform this task especially well.

Chapter 2 provides a good overview of the key philosophical figures in Ricoeur's discussion of time: Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, Husserl and Heidegger. The key contrast here is between 'the time of the soul' represented by Augustine and Husserl and 'the time of the world' represented by Aristotle and Kant. The disparity between these two accounts reflects the paradox of time, that is, the gap between a sense of time that is entirely for us and a sense of time that exists entirely without us. Ricoeur sets out to resolve this paradox by showing that these two alternatives, though seemingly opposed, ultimately presuppose one another. There cannot be a time of the soul without some type of reference to the world, nor vice versa. Ricoeur thus attunes the reader to the various ways in which human beings mediate between these two different conceptions of time, for example, in calendar time or narrated time. This chapter thus highlights, in a clear and concise way, the great insight of the Ricoeurian account of time.

Chapter 3, 'Narrativity', goes on to situate Ricoeur's account of narrative against the backdrop of the leading accounts of narrative among his contemporaries. Here students can gain a quick but approachable exposure to the views of theorists like Levi-Strauss, Propp, Greimas, Bremond and Frye. This backdrop helps the reader to appreciate the specific innovation behind Ricoeur's recovery of the Aristotelian notion of plot. Ricoeur's criticism of structuralist and formalist approaches to narratives is that they leave out the *telos* of a plot as well as the conception of characters as dwelling in a world of goals and purposes (43). Dowling is at his best as he unfolds the significance of a third time—a 'narrated time'—which describes the temporality specific to the plot of a narrative. Here time exists simultaneously on two levels. It includes the time of the characters whose actions and choices unfold one by one within the context of their unknown results, as well as the time of the narrator who already knows the results that those actions and choices will have. The moment of discovery in a plot is the moment when these two levels of temporality intersect.

Along with the many highlights to be found in this book, I also want to pinpoint why the book will offer its readers a fine introduction but nothing more than that. This is due in large part to Dowling's decision to organize his chapters in terms of key concepts in Ricoeur's work, as noted above. What results is a surprisingly un-Ricoeurian narrative, that is, a book in which the chapters unfold in a sequence that follow 'one after another' but lack the structure of 'one because of another' that characterizes a narrative plot. This decision, though justifiable for an introduction, imposes at least two identifiable limitations on the book.

First of all, it leads the book's conclusion in Chapter 6, 'The Poetics of Fiction', to fall short. After describing the temporality of narrative, Dowling concludes by pointing to the significance of the notion of 'transcendence within immanence,' which he represents through a set of three concentric but expanding spheres (97). The first sphere refers to the characters themselves who make choices, act, and form judgments in a narrative. The second sphere exists within the narrator's consciousness. Although the characters act and make choices, these choices are always mediated by the consciousness of a narrator who stands apart from them. The third sphere is the consciousness of the

reader in whom the story comes alive. It is here that the narrative breaks through its enclosure within the text in order to meet up with the practical world of its reader. But as I understand Ricoeur, this intersection between the world of the work and the world of the reader is precisely what is most important about narrative. It thus came as a surprise to me that Dowling did not go further to describe its transformative power. As a result, the reader is left without a clear sense of what Ricoeur ultimately considers to be the purpose of narrative.

This, in turn, points to what might be considered a second limitation of the book. By focusing on key concepts instead of the argumentative structure of *Time and Narrative*, Dowling makes a decision to minimize the dialectical movement that guides the three volumes (cf. xi-xii). Generally speaking, Ricoeur's method is to closely scrutinize leading views on a given topic and to show that each of them on its own eventually winds up in an aporia, or, a problem that it cannot resolve. Much of Ricoeur's creativity then results from his ability to resolve these aporias through a productive mediation of views that initially seemed to be opposed to one another. The interweaving of concepts and reconciliation of opposing views that takes place throughout *Time and Narrative* is covered over as a result of Dowling's interpretive strategy.

Every introduction, like every interpretation, has to make some decisions about what to highlight and what to place in the background. My point here has simply been to identify some of the consequences that follow from Dowling's decision to focus on an explication of the key concepts in Ricoeur's work. What Dowling delivers is an accessible and very useful introduction to a long, difficult, and complicated text. From this starting point, he makes it possible for students of Ricoeur's work to take up the task of interpretation and creative appropriation on their own and in their own respective ways.

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