

PAUL RICOEUR

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Hermeneutics

# Hermeneutics

Writings and Lectures, Volume 2

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Paul Ricoeur

Translated by David Pellauer



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“Towards a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation” was published in *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977): 1–37.

# Preface

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## Hermeneutics in the Work of Ricoeur

Hermeneutics, in France as elsewhere abroad, is frequently associated with the work of Paul Ricoeur. He contributed in many ways to making known this discipline devoted to the theory of interpretation, notably through two of his important collections of essays, *The Conflict of Interpretations* and *From Text to Action*, both of which bear the subtitle: *Essays in Hermeneutics*.<sup>1</sup> His own work is hermeneutic in two ways.

First of all, for Ricoeur hermeneutics constituted a philosophical *method*, one among others that he sought to articulate. This is particularly evident in his *Philosophy of the Will* volumes where Ricoeur integrates hermeneutics with a type of phenomenological analysis.<sup>2</sup> In these volumes Ricoeur seeks to provide a

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974); *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erzaim V. Kohák (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966); *Fallible Man*, rev. trans. Charles A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986); *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

phenomenological description of the voluntary in relation to the involuntary, then, turning to confront the problem of an evil will, he proposes an interpretation of the symbols of evil as they come from the biblical tradition and that of Greek tragedy. Only such an *interpretation* allows us to grasp the passage from the mere possibility of erring (fallibility) to acknowledging the existence of the fault. Then, to conclude, Ricoeur theorizes about the necessity to articulate pure reflection on the basis of such linguistic symbols which always precede it. This is the meaning of his well-known aphorism, “the symbol gives rise to thought,” which has to be understood as a wager.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur brings together in a similar manner the phenomenology of memory and a hermeneutic reflection bearing on our historical condition and the explanatory understanding of human works.<sup>4</sup> These two examples, among others, show that for him hermeneutics is a philosophical method that cannot be set up as a universal method. It can be used only where it turns out to be relevant, at the end of a process of objectification and analysis, preliminary to reflections of a more ethical or ontological nature.<sup>5</sup> Hermeneutics thus designates one of Ricoeur’s ways of doing philosophy, in that he is concerned – like Kant – to establish the conditions of validity of different possible methods. The genius of hermeneutics, defined as a “general theory of interpretation,” is that it commits itself scrupulously to the interpretation of human signs, whether they be symbols, texts, or quasi-texts (actions).<sup>6</sup> As such, hermeneutics presents itself as a distantiated, critical reflection on the operations of explanation and understanding at play in the interpretation of cultural artifacts, whether of an everyday or a more scientific nature.

If, for Ricoeur, hermeneutics appears as a philosophical method adapted to certain objects marked by their linguistic nature, it also

<sup>3</sup> *The Symbolism of Evil*, 347.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly clear in *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), where the hermeneutic moment constitutes a transition between an analytic description of action and an ethics that itself leads to the sketch of an ontology.

<sup>6</sup> *From Text to Action*, xiii.

designates the very *style* of his philosophy insofar as it takes as its task coming to know the subject. As Ricoeur notes in his intellectual autobiography, this subject “does not know itself directly but only through the signs deposited in memory and in imagination by culture.”<sup>7</sup> In this regard, the whole of Ricoeur’s work bears the stamp of the “hermeneutical age of reason,” to recall Jean Greisch’s formula which Ricoeur applied to himself.<sup>8</sup> Hermeneutics is the face assumed by the philosophy of reflection when, in order to come to know the subject, philosophy chooses to take the long detour through the interpretation of signs of this subject’s existence. In so doing, Ricoeur’s philosophy illustrates a profound conviction: the way from the self to the self necessarily passes through the detour of what is other than the self. Or, to put it another way, the wish to know oneself will be premature if it does not take, in some way, the passage through the signs that speak about the world. In “On Interpretation,” an essay from 1983 in which he looks back on and sums up the work he had done up until then, Ricoeur already presents hermeneutics as what completes and corrects his continued attachment to a philosophy of the subject, all too often forgetful of the mediations that any knowledge of the self presupposes (notably in Descartes but also in Husserl): “I should like to characterize this philosophical tradition by three features: it stands in the line of a *reflexive* philosophy; it remains within the sphere of Husserlian *phenomenology*; it strives to be a *hermeneutical* variation of this phenomenology.”<sup>9</sup>

In the final analysis, it is because hermeneutics designates one method among others and also the style of his philosophy – that hermeneutics is the object of sustained, constant attention in his

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Intellectual Autobiography,” in Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 16. The distinction between hermeneutic method and style is further developed in Daniel Frey, “Entre la méthode et le style: usages de l’herméneutique chez Ricoeur,” in C. Sautereau and S. Catonguay, eds, *Usages de l’herméneutique* (Laval: Presses de l’université Laval, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Jean Greisch, *L’Âge herméneutique de la raison* (Paris: Cerf, 1985). See also the Introduction to *Oneself as Another*, 25, and the title of the volume on Ricoeur from the *decade de Cerisy* dedicated to this thought: *Paul Ricoeur: Les Métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*, ed. Jean Greisch and Richard Kearney (Paris: Cerf, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> *From Text to Action*, 12.

work – makes Ricoeur one of the leading thinkers in this tradition, alongside Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. The essays brought together in this second volume of “Essays and Lectures,” published under the auspices of the *Fonds Ricoeur* (the Ricoeur Foundation), bear witness to this fact and to his contribution to hermeneutics.

## Essays on Hermeneutics

Like the first volume in this series, this volume offers readers the opportunity to discover texts whose publication had been authorized by Paul Ricoeur, but which, because they originally appeared in works long out of print or in different languages, and which are not easily obtained, are still largely unknown, particularly to a French-speaking audience. Again, as with the first volume, the manuscripts of these texts, all reviewed by Ricoeur, are now held by the Ricoeur Archive. Hence it was not the desire to add a new volume on hermeneutics to a set of works now closed that motivated the editors of this volume, but rather a concern to offer a new entry to Ricoeur’s important writings on interpretation. If his work on hermeneutics is in some ways better known abroad, notably in Italy and Germany, than in France, this was often because readers there had access to texts that, for all their being no less representative of Ricoeur’s thinking, bear witness to his pedagogical concern to transmit clearly the main lines of his own contribution to modern hermeneutical theory.

This is the case for the set of four lectures brought together here under the title “The Hermeneutic Problem,” which were delivered in Florence in May 1998 and published in an Italian translation following Ricoeur’s death in 2005. These lectures gave Ricoeur the opportunity to condense the steps of his own development regarding hermeneutics. From the hermeneutics of symbols, which closed the *Freedom and Nature* volumes, through a hermeneutics centered on the “world of the text,” to the elaborating of the ethical consequences of a hermeneutical theory of action, it is the unity of this development within a linguistic sphere that Ricoeur takes up and comments on for his listeners. Not only do these texts bear witness to the didactic concern of their author, they permit us to catch on the run, as it were, the



advance in his research at the moment where the reflections were being elaborated that was to lead to the hermeneutics at work in his major work, *Oneself as Another*. Although these four lectures are sufficient unto themselves and can be read as such, they can equally serve as a guide for reading his major works.

Among the many articles devoted to hermeneutics that merit for one reason or another being discovered – or rediscovered – some, like “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics,” which first appeared in 1972 in the *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, marked important steps in the elaboration of Ricoeur’s contribution to hermeneutical debates. Thus, one finds in this essay a condensed summary of the analyses devoted to metaphor and hermeneutics developed in *The Rule of Metaphor*, a condensation that is all the more valuable in that this essential text remains a difficult one owing to the technical nature of some of the discussions it presents (regarding Aristotle, Jakobson, Benveniste, Black, Frege, etc.).<sup>10</sup>

The lecture titled “Hermeneutical Logic?” first delivered in Paris at the Institut International de Philosophie in 1978, and then published in French in 1981, shows Ricoeur’s knowledge of developments in hermeneutics, which was little known to his French audience; for example, that of Hans Lipps, from whom Ricoeur takes the title of his lecture. This lecture bears witness above all to Ricoeur’s constant desire to confront the ontological hermeneutics inherited from Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer with the epistemological and logical questions raised by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel. A veritable “literature survey” of work dealing with hermeneutics since the 1960s, this text is an indispensable complement to the essays printed in *From Text to Action*, in which Ricoeur situated his own hermeneutical theory in relation to his predecessors (Heidegger and Gadamer). Like them, Ricoeur looks for a median position between ontological hermeneutics and the Habermasian critique of hermeneutics. This comes down to showing both sides that hermeneutics includes a critical dimension, one that assures it a real epistemological status.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

This selection of Paul Ricoeur's texts devoted to hermeneutics would be incomplete if it silently passed by his insightful and, in the French context, rare, contribution to biblical hermeneutics. Thus it was necessary to include a couple of the essays that he designated (too modestly, no doubt) as his "intermittent incursions into the field of biblical exegesis" and "religious language."<sup>11</sup> Refusing the label of a Christian philosophy, preferring instead that of a "philosophy without any absolute," it was as a philosopher, not as a theologian, that Ricoeur looked at biblical literature (from both the Old and New Testaments), with the intention of asking how the Bible gives rise to thought.<sup>12</sup> "Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation," which dates from 1977, is without doubt one of his most influential essays on biblical hermeneutics. In it, Ricoeur proposes a dialectical understanding of the notions of revelation and truth that has important consequences. Besides this essay, which many people requested, are less typical essays, like the one – previously unpublished in French – included here titled "Salvation Myths and Contemporary Reason," which provides Ricoeur with the opportunity as a philosopher to consider the question of salvation by way of a reflection on myth and history.

Daniel Frey

<sup>11</sup> "Intellectual Autobiography," 41 and 24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 and 53.

## Editors' Note

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The “essays and lectures” brought together in this book were chosen by Daniel Frey and Nicola Strickler, at the invitation of Catherine Goldenstein, administrator of the Ricoeur Foundation, Jean Greisch, and Jean-Louis Schlegel, all three members of the Editorial Committee of the Ricoeur Foundation. Daniel Frey and Nicola Strickler, as members of the Scholar’s Advisory Committee of the Fonds Ricoeur, were responsible for the preparation of this edition and its annotations. As with the preceding volume, it is Ricoeur’s complete texts as he left them that appear here. Any modifications have only to do with punctuation and the spelling of a few words, along with the corrections of some typographical errors. Ricoeur’s own notes are indicated by the addition of the indication: Ricoeur’s note. When the editors have added biographical data to one of Ricoeur’s own notes, this is indicated by the addition of the indication: ed. (= editors’ addition).

D. F and N. S.

## Translator's Note

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The editors of the French edition of this collection of essays chose to include numerous notes and annotations to these essays indicating places in Ricoeur's and other authors' works where a topic presented in them appears or is discussed. Their notes also included explanations of some of the more technical terms, particularly those found in the essays that deal with biblical interpretation, that might not be familiar to all readers.

My working assumption in preparing this translation has been that English-speaking readers would not be served by these references to French texts. Ricoeur's own notes, where they exist, and references to any work he cites have, of course, been preserved, and where English versions of the work in question are available that is the title cited.

David Pellauer

## Origin of the Texts

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*The Problem of Hermeneutics* brings together four lectures presented to a seminar titled “Un itinerario filosofico: Seminario con Paul Ricoeur,” offered at the Instituto Stensen in Florence from 19 to 22 May 1988. Ricoeur agreed at that time to allow the text to be translated into Italian and published, but it did not appear until after his death in an issue of *Filosofia e Teologia* 2 (2006): 236–73, devoted to his work.

*Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics* was published in the *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 70 (1972): 93–115. Previous translations have appeared in English, German, Spanish, Polish, Japanese, and Norwegian.

“*Hermeneutical Logic?*” was presented as a lecture to the Institut international de philosophie in Paris in 1978. It was published in French in G. Fløistad, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, volume 1: *Philosophy of Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 179–223.

*Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation* is the text of a lecture given at the Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis in Brussels in 1976, later published in the volume Paul Ricoeur et al., *La Révélation* (Publications des Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1977), 15–54, which includes the discussion that followed

Ricoeur's lecture, including questions from Edgar Haulotte and Emmanuel Levinas (207–36).

*Salvation Myths and Reason* first appeared in an Italian translation by E. De Dominicis, in G. Ferretti, ed., *La ragione e i simboli della salvezza oggi*, atti del quarto colloquio su filosofia et religion (Marcerata, 1988), Pubblicazioni della Facoltà di lettere e filosofia 53 (Marietti, 1990), 15–31. The French manuscript now is held in the Ricoeur Archive in Paris.

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# 1

## The Problem of Hermeneutics

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### I Hermeneutics and Symbolism

In this opening lecture I hope you will allow me to give an autobiographical slant to my presentation and to speak of how for my own enlightenment I came upon the problems of symbolism.<sup>1</sup> This “historical” approach to my presentation seems to me to

<sup>1</sup>The four lectures presented here were given by Paul Ricoeur on the occasion of a seminar titled “Un itinerario filosofico: seminario con Paul Ricoeur,” at the Instituto Stensen in Florence, Italy, held on May 19–21, 1988. They were published in an Italian translation under the title “I problemi dell’ermeneutica” in the journal *Filosofia e Teologia* 2 (2006): 236–73. In the French version of this text we kept the singular “hermeneutic” in conformity with the indication given by Ricoeur himself on the manuscript, even though the expression “The Problem of Hermeneutics” – inherited from Dilthey, Gadamer, and Bultmann – occurs frequently in his works. The first lecture “Hermeneutics and Symbolism” takes up in part the contents of another lecture given in 1987 on the occasion of an international symposium devoted to Ricoeur in Grenada, Spain, and published under the titled “Self-Understanding and History,” in T. Calvo Martinez and R. Avila Crespo, eds, *Paul Ricoeur: Los caminos de la interpretación* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1991), 9–25. Some elements of this lecture also appear in Ricoeur’s “Intellectual Autobiography,” in Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 3–53.



have a certain didactic force, in that the breadth of the problem of interpretation appeared to me bit by bit, each time on the occasion of a particular and limited problem. Looking back, it seems to me that each of my books has been meant to answer a question with a well-delimited response that imposed itself on me. And the works that followed stemmed from those questions left unresolved by the preceding ones.

It was first of all along the trajectory of a philosophy of the will that the question of symbolism imposed itself for me in connection with one limited problem, that of the symbols of evil. This problem itself stemmed from the question left unresolved by a purely reflexive and eidetic analysis (in the Husserlian sense of these terms) of the structures of the voluntary and the involuntary.

If I chose to begin with the problem of the will, it was with the intention of giving a counterpart, in the practical order, to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, which I admired unreservedly; I mean without the reservation that Merleau-Ponty himself was later to express in *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>2</sup> It seemed to me that what Merleau-Ponty had done for the theoretical field needed to be done for the practical one, namely, on the one hand, to give an eidetic analysis of the structures of the project, of voluntary motion, and of consent to the absolute involuntary, and, on the other hand, to give a dialectical analysis of the relations between activity and passivity. In seeking to provide a kind of complement to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, I also hoped to arbitrate for myself the confrontation between Husserl and Gabriel Marcel. To Husserl, I owed the methodology indicated by the term "eidetic analysis" (which is why I defined "decision" as the noesis whose noematic correlate was the project intended as "what was to be done"). But it was to Marcel that I owed the problematic of a subject both incarnate and capable of setting at a distance its desires and powers; in short, a subject master of itself, yet servant of that necessity figured by character, the unconscious, birth, and death. It was in order to respond to

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962); *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).