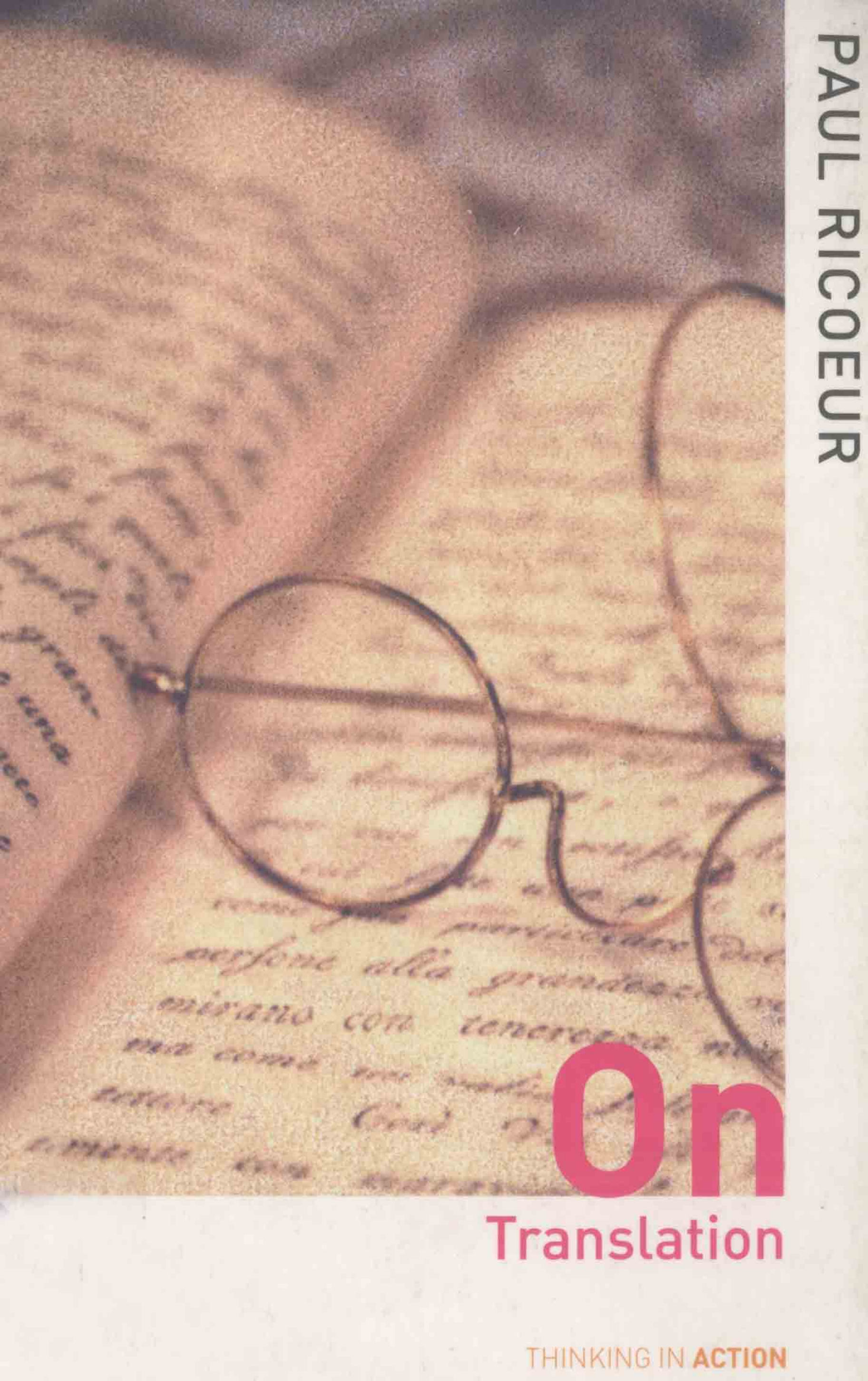
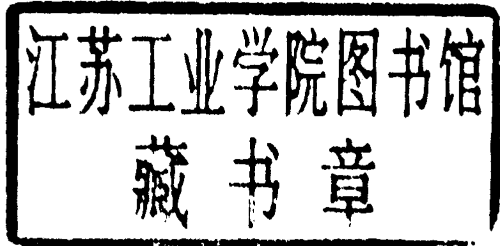

PAUL RICOEUR
On
Translation
THINKING IN ACTION

PAU

Translated by Eileen Brennan

With an introduction by
Richard Kearney



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Note on the texts

The three essays in this volume were published together in French by Bayard, Paris in 2004 under the title *Sur la traduction*. 'Translation as challenge and source of happiness' was originally the text of an address given at the German Historical Institute of Paris on 15 April 1997; 'The paradigm of translation' (inaugural lecture at the Faculty of Protestant Theology, Paris, in October 1998) was first published in *Esprit* 853 (June 1999). 'A "Passage" ' first appeared in *Sur la traduction*.

Introduction: Ricoeur's philosophy of translation

Richard Kearney

Translation has been a central feature of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy, though it was not until his later years that he actually made it an explicit theme of his work. The three essays collected in this volume are three such instances.

Well before Ricoeur thematized the subject, the act of translation was something which this leading twentieth-century thinker actually *performed* in his philosophical practice. Ricoeur was an inveterate mediator, someone who navigated and negotiated transits between rival intellectual positions. He was unequalled as a diplomat of philosophical exchange, forever finding a point of commerce – if not always resolution – between ostensibly irreconcilable viewpoints. Between Continental and Anglo-Saxon thought at the most general level. Then, within the Continental tradition more specifically, between existentialism and structuralism; between hermeneutics and Critical Theory; between phenomenology and the human sciences; between Freudian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics; between literary theory and the philosophy of religion; between historical understanding (*Verstehen*) and scientific explanation (*Erklären*); between psychology and neuroscience; between ethics and politics, and so on. What is remarkable in all these critical intercessions is that Ricoeur

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never ceased to respect both adversarial partners in the exchange, deftly transmuting conflict into conversation. And this without ever sacrificing depth of conviction or acuity of evaluation. In his philosophical role as translator, Ricoeur was, I believe, unrivalled in his time. In a sense, one could say that Ricoeur's thought represented both philosophy *as* translation and a philosophy *of* translation.

Before proceeding to a more detailed account of Ricoeur's thematic analysis of translation, however, I wish to offer a brief overview of Ricoeur's expansive intellectual itinerary from his youthful explorations of existential phenomenology to his final writings on narrative, memory and history.

RICOEUR'S INTELLECTUAL ITINERARY

Paul Ricoeur died in his sleep at the age of ninety-two at his home in Châtenay-Malabry (Hauts-de-Seine outside Paris) on 20 May 2005.

Ricoeur was one of the most challenging, hospitable and enduring thinkers of the twentieth century. Born in Valence, France, in 1913, he taught as professor of philosophy at the universities of Strasbourg, Paris (IV and X) and Louvain and as John Niveen Chair at the University of Chicago. Ricoeur published over thirty major works during his lifetime, ranging from existentialism and phenomenology to psychoanalysis, politics, religion and the theory of language. But Ricoeur was much more than a brilliant intellectual mediator between competing schools of thought. He also, and most significantly, developed his own particular brand of philosophical hermeneutics. Determined to find a path between (1) the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Gadamer and (2) the more radical hermeneutics of deconstruction (Derrida, Caputo) and Critical Theory (Habermas), Ricoeur

endeavoured to chart a middle way which combined both the empathy and conviction of the former and the suspicion and detachment of the latter. He himself never gave a name to this third path (he was wary of founding a new ideology or -ism). But I think we would not be far wrong in naming it dialogical or diacritical hermeneutics. There were not many major figures in contemporary thought – Husserl, Freud, Rawls, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Saussure, Austen, Arendt, Jaspers, Marcel, Habermas, Levinas, Derrida – with whom he did not engage in robust debate.

Taking his tune from such German hermeneutic thinkers as Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, Ricoeur elaborated a complex set of inquiries into what he called the enigma of 'semantic innovation'. How does new meaning come to be? How do we reconfigure the meanings of the past? These basic hermeneutic questions were guided by the thesis that existence is itself a mode of interpretation (*hermeneia*). Or, as the hermeneutic maxim went: *Life interprets itself.* But where Heidegger concentrated directly on a fundamental ontology of interpretation, Ricoeur advanced what he called the 'long route' of multiple hermeneutic detours. This brought him into dialogue with the human sciences where philosophy discovers its limits in what is outside of philosophy. It prompted him to invigilate those border exchanges where meaning traverses the various signs and disciplines in which being is interpreted by human understanding. Ricoeur thus challenged Heidegger's view that Being is accessible through the 'short route' of human existence (*Dasein*) which understands itself through its own possibilities. He argued instead that the meaning of Being is always mediated through an endless process of interpretations – cultural, religious, political, historical

and scientific. Hence Ricoeur's basic definition of hermeneutics as the 'art of deciphering *indirect* meaning'.

Philosophy, for Ricoeur, was hermeneutical to the extent that it read hidden meanings in apparent meanings. And the task of hermeneutics was to show how existence arrives at expression, and later again at reflection, through the perpetual exploration of the significations that emerge in the symbolic works of culture. More particularly, human existence only becomes a self by retrieving meanings which first reside 'outside' of itself in the social institutions and cultural monuments in which the life of the spirit is inscribed.

One of the first critical targets of Ricoeur's hermeneutics was the idealist doctrine that the self is transparent to itself. In two of his earliest works – *The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950) and *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960) – Ricoeur exploded the pretensions of the cogito to be self-founding and self-knowing. He insisted that the shortest route from self to self is through the other. Or to put it in Ricoeur's felicitous formula: 'to say self is not to say I'. Why? Because the hermeneutic self is much *more* than an autonomous subject. Challenging the reign of the transcendental ego, Ricoeur proposed the notion of *oneself-as-another* in an influential work which carried this same title (1990 in French; 1992 in English). Here he spoke of a *soi* that passes beyond the illusory confines of the *moi* and discovers its meaning in and through the linguistic mediations of signs and symbols, stories and ideologies, metaphors and myths. In the most positive hermeneutic scenario, outlined in his three-volume *Time and Narrative* in the eighties, the self returns to itself after numerous hermeneutic detours through the languages of others, to find itself enlarged and enriched by the odyssey. The Cartesian model of the cogito as 'master and possessor' of meaning is henceforth radically subverted.

We thus find Ricoeur steering a medial course beyond the rationalism of Descartes and Kant, on the one hand, and the phenomenology of Husserl, Heidegger and existentialists, on the other. (Ricoeur actually began a translation of Husserl's *Ideas* during his captivity in a German prisoner-of-war camp in the early 1940s which was published in 1950.) Where Husserl located meaning in the subject's intuition of the 'things themselves' as manifest in transcendental consciousness, Ricoeur followed the hermeneutic dictum that intuition is always a matter of interpretation. This implied that things are always given to us *indirectly* through a detour of signs; but it did not entail an embrace of existentialist irrationalism. The interpretation (*hermeneia*) of indirect or tacit meaning invites us to think *more*, not to abandon speculative thought altogether. And nowhere was this more evident than in the challenge posed by symbolic meaning (Ricoeur's first explicitly hermeneutic work was entitled *The Symbolism of Evil*, published in 1960). By symbols Ricoeur understood all expressions of double meaning wherein a primary meaning referred beyond itself to a second meaning which is never given immediately. This 'surplus meaning' provokes interpretation. *The symbol gives rise to thought*, as Ricoeur put it in what was to be become his most celebrated maxim.

Let me add, at his point, a personal note. An obituary memory as it were. Every time I visited Ricoeur over the years at his home in Châtenay-Malabry, outside Paris, I was invariably struck by the hosts of owls furnishing his bureau and library. Ricoeur was, in more ways than one, the living epitome of the Owl of Minerva – a thinker who always preferred the long route over the short cut and never wrote an essay or book until he had first experienced and questioned deeply what it was he was writing about. He, like the Owl of Wisdom

in Hegel's legendary example, only took flight at dusk when he had fully attended to what transpired (in the realm of both action and suffering) during the long day's journey into night. The fact that Ricoeur endured for almost a century – following in the footsteps of his fellow hermeneutician, Gadamer (is there something in the hermeneutic water?) – additionally qualified him, of course, for the emblematic title of a wise old owl. Someone born in 1913 who witnessed three world wars (counting the Cold War), suffered years of prison captivity under the Nazis, taught in dozens of universities throughout the world and published several dozen major volumes of philosophy, knows, I think, what he is talking about when he completes a book in his ninetieth year entitled *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. It is a privilege, I would suggest, for us, his readers, to learn deeply from his lived reflections.

Some time before he died Ricoeur received a gift of a marzipan owl statue. He placed it by his bed and gleefully planned to play a joke on his grandchildren (whom he called affectionately 'les petits becs'). During their next visit he was going to pretend he was biting into one of the many marble owls in his collection, as if this had become one of his daily culinary habits! He didn't live to carry out the joke. But it is a telling token of Ricoeur's mischievous sense of humour and love of life.

RICOEUR'S PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSLATION

There are two paradigms of translation for Ricoeur. There is, first, the *linguistic paradigm* which refers to how words relate to meanings within language or between languages. And there is, second, the *ontological paradigm* which refers to how translation occurs between one human self and another.[1] Let me say something about each.

Language is one yet languages are many. In this very distinction lies the primordial need for translation. What all languages share in common is a capacity to mediate between a human speaker and a world of meanings (actual and possible) spoken about. But if this function constitutes the unifying property of language, the fact there there exist a plurality of languages, both living and dead, means that we are faced with a double duty of translation, internal and external.

A brief look at the historical development of the philosophy of translation will help clarify the issue. Some of the earliest reflections on the problems and enigmas of translation go back, at least in Western history, to the great encounters between cultures. In classical times, we find the translation between Greek and Latin languages to be a crucial landmark; while the famous feats of biblical translation from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek and Latin, ranging from the Septuagint to the decisive translations of St Jerome (author of the Vulgate), or later again, of Luther in German, or the King James authors in English, mark yet another set of milestones in the history of interlinguistic translation. Among the earliest words for a translator were in Greek *hermeneus* and in Latin *interpres*. Both terms carry the sense of an intermediary labouring between two distinct languages or speakers. The term translator, as we know it today, arises from the Latin verb *transfero, transfere, translatum*, which evolves into the term *translatare, translater* in the Romance languages of the Middle Ages (hence the later English *translate*). In the fifteenth century, the Italian humanist Leonardo Bruni became the first modern thinker to devote an entire scientific treatise to the art of translation, entitled *De Interpretatione Recta* (1420). Here we witness the original appearance of the term *traducere* referring to a unitary concept of translation, and giving rise in the sixteenth

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century to the French term *traducteur*, employed by the humanist Etienne Doler.[2] The twentieth century saw a number of influential theorists of translation, from Croce and Rosenzweig to Benjamin (*The Task of the Translator*) and Steiner (*After Babel*). The present volume of essays by Ricoeur, appearing as it does at the beginning of the twenty-first century (the original French edition, *Sur la traduction*, was published in 2004), follows firmly and faithfully in the footsteps of these intellectual predecessors. What Ricoeur adds is a singularly hermeneutic twist, which I touch on below.

There is no doubt that some of the great translations of biblical and classical texts played formative roles in the development of both national and cultural identities. One thinks of the huge influence exerted by Luther's German translation of the Bible, or the Moravian Brethren's Czech translation, or the Genevan French translation; not to mention the crucial role played by renditions of classical texts in the birth of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment or Romanticism. In all these instances, the transmigration of one linguistic thesaurus into another was linked with modern ideas of human emancipation and change. And the momentous encounter with the Other outside the nation, or indeed the European world generally – with the discovery of other continents and civilizations from the fifteenth century onwards – was a crucial reminder of the necessity of translation. Thus understood, translation has always been, in Antoine Berman's resonant phrase, *une épreuve de l'étranger*.[3] For better or for worse.

Translation can be understood here in both a specific and a general sense. In the specific sense – the one in common contemporary usage – it signals the work of translating the meanings of one particular language into another. In the more generic sense, it indicates the everyday act of speaking as a

way not only of translating oneself to oneself (inner to outer, private to public, unconscious to conscious, etc.) but also and more explicitly of translating oneself to others. As Dominico Jervolino puts it:

> To speak is already to translate (even when one is speaking one's own native language or when one is speaking to oneself); further, one has to take into account the plurality of languages, which demand a more exacting encounter with the different Other. One is tempted to say that there is a plurality of languages because we are originally plural. The encounter with the Other cannot be avoided. If one accepts the necessary nature of the encounter, linguistic pluralism appears no longer as a malediction, as the received interpretation of the myth of Babel would have it, but as a condition which requires us to surrender the all-encompassing dream of a perfect language (and of a global translation, so to speak, without residues). The partiality and the finitude of individual languages is then viewed not as an insurmountable obstacle but as the very precondition of communication among individuals.[4]

Jervolino is explicating here one of Ricoeur's most central insights. Ricoeur compares the work of the translator to that of a middleman between 'two masters', between an author and a reader, a self and another. He underlines the word 'work', stressing the importance of a labour both of memory and of mourning. As such, he borrows liberally from Freud's famous notion of 'working through' (*Durcharbeitung*). This emphasis on the *labour* character of translation refers to the common experience of tension and suffering which the translator undergoes as he/she checks the impulse to reduce the otherness of the other, thereby subsuming alien meaning into

one's own scheme of things. The work of translation might thus be said to carry a double duty: to expropriate oneself as one appropriates the other. We are called to make our language put on the stranger's clothes at the same time as we invite the stranger to step into the fabric of our own speech.

Ricoeur argues that good translations involve some element of openness to the other. Indeed he suggests that we be prepared to forfeit our native language's claim to self-sufficiency – which can sometimes go to extremes of nationalism and chauvinism – in order to 'host' (qua *hospes*) the 'foreign' (*hostis*). Indeed, as the linguist Émile Benveniste points out in *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, the two terms *hospes* and *hostis* are etymologically akin.[5] Following Benveniste, Ricoeur writes:

> Despite the conflictual character which renders the task of the translator dramatic, he or she will find satisfaction in what I would like to call *linguistic hospitality*. Its predicament is that of a correspondence without complete adhesion. This is a fragile condition, which admits of no verification other than a new translation . . . a sort of duplication of the work of the translator which is possible in virtue of a minimum of bilingualism: to translate afresh after the translator.

And he adds:

> Just as in a narration it is always possible to tell the story in a different way, likewise in translation it is always possible to translate otherwise, without ever hoping to bridge the gap between equivalence and perfect adhesion. Linguistic hospitality, therefore, is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling.[6]

Linguistic hospitality calls us to forgo the lure of omnipotence: the illusion of a total translation which would provide a perfect replica of the original. Instead it asks us to respect the fact that the semantic and syntactic fields of two languages are not the same, or exactly reducible the one to the other. Connotations, contexts and cultural characteristics will always exceed any slide rule of neat equations between tongues. Short of some kind of abstract symbolic logic or fantasy Esperanto logos there is no single unitary language. Translation is always *after Babel*. It is forever compelled to acknowledge the finite limits of language, the multiplicity of different tongues. To function authentically, therefore, the translator must renounce the dream of a return to some adamantine logos of pure correspondences. The attempt to retrieve a prelapsarian paradise of timeless signs is futile. Even the Enlightenment ideal of a perfect universal language was obliged to recognize the genuine resistances of cultural differences predicated upon linguistic diversities. Indeed, most attempts to instantiate an absolute universal language proved, in point of fact, to be thinly disguised imperial ploys to impose one particular language (French, English, Spanish, etc.) over other politically subordinate ones.

As soon as there is language there is interpretation, that is translation. *In principio fuit interpres*. Words exist in time and space, and thus have a history of meanings which alter and evolve. All translation involves some aspect of dialogue between self and stranger. Dialogue means just that, *dia-legein*, welcoming the difference. It is for this reason that in his essay 'The paradigm of translation' Ricoeur proposes translation as a model of hermeneutics. Both in its normal role as a transfer of meaning from one language to another and in its more specific role as a transfer of understanding between different

members of the same linguistic community, translation entails an exposure to strangeness. We are dealing with both an alterity residing outside the home language *and* an alterity residing within it.

> The gap between a hypothetical perfect language and the concreteness of a living language is felt again and again in the linguistic exchange: it is always possible to say the same thing in a different way. Now, to say something in a different way, to say it in other terms, is exactly what a translator does from one language to the other. The inputs at the two ends, the two halves of the problem, so to speak, clarify each other and present again the enigma and the richness of the relationship with the Other.[7]

It might be noted that Ricoeur's theory of translation here follows a similar emphasis to his theory of the text as model of interpretation in the seventies and eighties. In both cases, Ricoeur underlines the 'distancing' of sense. In the case of the written text this refers to how meaning gains autonomy from (1) the intention of the original author, (2) the original world of circumstances in which the author wrote or which s/he wrote about, and (3) the original readers of the text when it was first produced (e.g. the Greek community who read Homer's *Odyssey*). A similar aspect of 'distantiation' occurs in translation where the estrangement of meaning precedes and even provokes the subsequent act of reading as a renewed reappropriation of the original meaning. Or as Ricoeur liked to put it, the best path to selfhood is through otherness. Thus while Schleiermacher, Gadamer and the romantic hermeneuts tended to favour a somewhat Platonic model of dialogue as a return to original meanings, Ricoeur might be said to favour a more Aristotelian model which

stresses a plurality of meanings and a methodical appreciation of the complex 'poetics' and 'rhetorics' involved in the interpretation of linguistic meaning. (Hence, as already noted, the importance of Ricoeur's call, *pace* Gadamer and Heidegger, for a rigorous critical relationship with the human sciences – including linguistics – and a surpassing of the old dichotomy between 'understanding' and 'explanation'.) For Ricoeur the matter is clear: there is no self-understanding possible without the labour of mediation through signs, symbols, narratives and texts. The idealist romantic self, sovereign master of itself and all it surveys, is replaced by an engaged self which only finds itself after it has traversed the field of foreignness and returned to itself again, this time altered and enlarged, 'othered'. The *moi* gives way to the *soi*, or more precisely to *soi-même comme un autre*. The arc of translation epitomizes this journey from self through the other, reminding us of the irreducible finitude and contingency of all language.

For Ricoeur, the task of outer translation finds echoes in the work of inner translation. Indeed the very problem of human identity, as he shows in *Oneself as Another*, involves a discovery of an other within the very depths of the self. This other within is itself plural, signifying by turns the unconscious, the body, the call of conscience, the traces of our relations with other human beings, or the sign of transcendence inscribed in the deepest interiority of the human heart. This means that the question of human identity, or more exactly the answer to the question '*who* are you?', always entails a translation between the self and others both within the self and outside the self. Every subject, as Ricoeur puts it, is a tapestry of stories heard and told. This makes of each one of us a narrative identity, operating as both authors and readers of our own lives. Which is another way of saying, *translators* of

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