

A virtual roundtable on Iser's legacy Part II: a conversation with Mark Freeman

Mark Freeman, Laura Lucia Rossi
College of the Holy Cross, University of Leeds

Abstract

In this article you find the second part of a roundtable on Wolfgang's Iser legacy with Gerald Prince, Mark Freeman, Marco Caracciolo and Federico Bertoni. In Part II we discuss with Prof. Mark Freeman the role of narrative hermeneutics in understanding the human realm and the tenets of self-interpretation, as well as the necessity of literary anthropology and literary theory.

Parole chiave

Narrative hermeneutics, narrative psychology, Ricoeur, self-interpretation, narrative studies.

Contatti

lauralucia.rossi@gmail.com

1. Narrative Hermeneutics

[LR] Professor Freeman, in your recent article "Why Narrative Matters: Philosophy, Method, Theory" you discuss the philosophical, methodological and theoretical necessity of narrative hermeneutics in understanding the human realm. How is this necessity unfolded in the double act of producing and receiving narratives? What is the specificity of literary narratives; how do they specifically contribute to the understanding of the human realm?

[MF] Having just taken a look at this piece and refreshed my memory, I see some strange and surprising ideas. In addressing the philosophical dimension of the triune necessity in question, I refer to «alterity», focusing not only on the kind of «self-alienation» considered by psychoanalysis (and some of its translators, such as Paul Ricoeur) but on the even more fundamental challenge posed by the fact that, in the end, we don't know how this event or that event, this life-epoch or that one, contributes to the selves we become. There is an irreducible obscurity here. But then, in the next section of this article, I turn to the issue of «fidelity», essentially arguing that, even amidst this irreducible and irrevocable obscurity, we somehow need to be faithful – to practice fidelity – to the 'texts' we are. And finally, there is what I called «ex-centricity», which has to do with those forms of inspiration, outside the perimeter of the self, that condition the stories we tell about ourselves. But what can this possibly mean? What can it mean to practice fidelity to texts that exude alterity? And how does this idea of ex-centricity fit into the picture?

Now that I've puzzled myself over some of my own questions, let me turn to yours. Following Freud in broad outline, I would maintain that self-narratives inevitably bear within them traces of the unconscious. Put in the simplest of terms, we are not transparent to ourselves; and so, whatever we might say about the movement of our lives is

bound to entail some measure of obscurity and opacity. This doesn't mean that we are utterly excluded from the possibility of direct self-understanding; in certain spheres of our lives, we can adopt an essentially phenomenological approach and make some solid headway. But insofar as the aforementioned self-alienation is real, which I think it is, a more 'roundabout' path (as Ricoeur had called it) is required, a hermeneutical path, one that might serve to de-mystify the mystifications at hand.

There is another aspect of the hermeneutical situation that ought to be mentioned here too – namely, that which has to do with the specifically narrative dimension. In much of my work, I explore the difference between life as lived, moment to moment, as life as told, from the vantage point of some present, looking backward. It's in this latter, synoptic moment that experience becomes episode, part of an evolving pattern. What we therefore find is an intimate connection between the hermeneutics of memory, as it plays itself out in narrative form, and the hermeneutics of reading, wherein episodes are progressively gathered together, such that a story, with a plot, can emerge.

As concerns your question regarding the specificity of literary narratives and the kind of contributions they can make to the understanding of the human realm, my own perspective, which I have voiced on a number of occasions in recent years, is that it is 'literariness' itself that's key. By literariness, I refer broadly to that aspect of literary texts which embodies the musicality and sensuous power of language. Whereas non-literary texts frequently serve to *in-form* – to provide information about this or that aspect of the world – literary texts frequently use language in such a way as to *trans-form*. Words, in the latter, are not mere vehicles of transmission; they matter, in themselves, as sites of disclosure. For instance, in several musings on what I have called «poetic science», I have suggested that the more artful one is crafting a narrative, whether about oneself or another, the more scientific one may be. Yes; this sounds paradoxical (perhaps even oxymoronic). But the idea is a quite simple one, actually: literary texts are often able to bring us closer to the lived world, in all of its dimensions, than scientific texts. In this sense, they are certainly in the business of «understanding the human realm».

2. Self-interpretation and narrative

[LR] Interpreting the world is the constant activity of humans. In one of his last books, *The Range of Interpretation*, Iser accounted for the array of genres of interpretation highlighting how they can all be understood as acts of translation meant to transpose something into something else. However, things seem more difficult when it comes to self-interpretation. This problem was also central in your book *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*. Do we need different approaches to account for narrative and literature as means for interpreting and as means for self-interpreting?

[MF] This is a fascinating and important question. Some of what I want to say in response to it is not unrelated to some of what was said in my previous response regarding the «self-alienation» and «opacity» of the self. As much as Ricoeur and others have spoken about the «textuality» of human action, there remains an important and very basic distinction between interpreting a literary text and interpreting oneself: whereas in the former case there is an actual text, with words and pages and chapters, in the latter there is not; all there is is the 'quasi-text' of one's past. In the process of self-understanding and self-writing, therefore, the interpreting person is in the challenging and often fraught process of interpreting something that, on some level, he or she has fashioned. There

can, of course, be artifacts – earlier pieces of writing, photos, and so on. At times, there may also be some relatively ‘clean’ memories, of the sort that may be seen to provide some compelling testimony about the past (i.e., the past present). But strictly speaking, there is no past, save what one conjures in the present. As cognitive psychologists and the like are fond of telling us, this situation opens up all kinds of problems, from «hind-sight bias» all the way to the myriad modes of self-inflation we might succumb to in order to reassure ourselves that our lives have been worthwhile. So it is that memory, of the sort that finds its way into the process of self-interpretation, is often seen as a realm of distortion, corruption, and falsification. It can certainly be this; there is no denying it. Through it all, however, self-interpretation can also, at times, yield insights, even truths, of a sort that cannot be had in the immediacy of the present moment. There are many reasons why this is important. Foremost among them, in my view, is that it allows for the possibility of articulating a more capacious conception of truth, one that emerges out of the narrative order itself. Ricoeur’s work is particularly important in this context.

3. Literature and self-interpretation

[LR] In his last works – e.g. *The Range of Interpretation* – Iser hinted at literature as the only human device capable of being a tool for self-interpretation. Paradoxically, this happens by providing a closure (a beginning and an end) and a more or less linear organisation of human experiences, as well as the infinite possibilities of starting this process all over again. Also, despite its great power, this process proves itself inconclusive, since self-interpretation results in the mapping of an ever-expanding territory. What are the advantages and the limits provided by literature and narrative as tools for self-interpretation? What can phenomenological approaches teach us about it?

[MF] I am not sure what it means to say that literature may be «the only human device capable of being a tool for self-interpretation». What else is there? Spouses, children, friendships, department meetings, and much, much more. All of these are potential tools, no? Some of them even involve beginnings, middles, and endings and thus have an overt narrative structure. At the same time, of course, there is nothing quite like an actual (narrative) text, which begins on page 1 and ends on some other page and in which, in-between, there is a story. Interestingly enough, this brings us back to one of the points that I offered in my previous response: lives are not texts. And, in turn, texts are not lives; they are, rather, idealizations, condensations, whose very boundedness, in a finite set of pages, bespeaks a world that is inevitably ‘cleaner’, in some ways, than the world beyond it. And yet, there are the «infinite possibilities» you refer to as well, such that each new narrative gives us a new image of what might be. Perhaps if we humans were equipped with infinite narrative powers literature would be unnecessary; we could simply look inside our own inner worlds and find the universes we seek. Because that isn’t the case, «prostheses» are needed, especially in the form of literary narratives. It is these that, juxtaposed against our own lives – our own understandings, prejudices, and outright blind spots – open up new regions of knowing and being. For all that we ‘construct’ the texts we read, therefore, it remains essential that we ‘unself’ ourselves (as Iris Murdoch might put it) sufficiently enough that they can have their say and can displace, or at least challenge, the understandings, or lack thereof, with which we began to read.

As for what phenomenological approaches can teach us about this process, the short answer is: a great deal. What first came to mind in this context were some of Hans-

Georg Gadamer's reflections – which, while more hermeneutical in nature, lead us in the direction of some very important ideas. A very brief story may be in order here. Not too long ago, I was asked to contribute a chapter to a volume on «constructivism», which, in certain psychological circles at any rate, is tantamount to a kind of reader-driven relativism. In any case, as a proponent of narrative hermeneutics, it was assumed that I was a constructivist and that indeed hermeneutics is itself a form of constructivism. Now, in comparison to cruder forms of positivism, I suppose it is: insofar as it avows readers' own participative belonging in the process of reading, some measure of 'construction' – I prefer poiesis – is entailed. But as Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and others have been quick to point out, it nevertheless remains essential to respect and preserve the otherness of the text, its capacity to speak to us «as an authentically different being and to manifest its own truth, over and against our preconceived notions (Gadamer 44). This directive was not issued out of some sort of a priori philosophical position, however. Rather, it grew out of the phenomenology of reading itself. In essence, they said: Let us look closely and carefully at what reading actually entails. When we do, we will see the limits of any and all approaches that serve to efface the otherness of the text through an over-estimation and over-valuation of the reader's role.

Let me try to clarify my position here by referring to Iser's well-known chapter on the process of reading from *The Implied Reader*. As Iser succinctly put the matter, «reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character». As such, «A literary text must [...] be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative» (275). In short, then, what we are encountering from this perspective is the setting-in-motion of the reader's imagination by the text and, in turn, the «activation» or «potentiation» of the text through this very imaginative engagement. As Iser goes on to note, the sentences comprising the text are not to be regarded as mere pieces, laid out independently, one after the other. Rather, they are «component parts» which, through their interaction and patterning, via reading, come to work and belong together, in service of the whole. «Expectations» are integral to the process. But they «are scarcely ever fulfilled in truly literary texts» (278). And for good reason: it is the open structure of expectation that allows the reader an inroad into the meaning-making process. There is, of course, much more to say about the phenomenology of reading; and Iser, along with Gadamer, Jauss, and others, gives us some valuable insights into how the reading process runs its course. What is most important to emphasize is the dynamic interplay of text and reader – the nature of which is intensified and complexified further when the 'text' in question is one's life and self. Is it possible for such a text (or quasi-text) to have the kind of transformative power that an actual text has? Is it possible for us to reach deep enough into our own otherness that our initial prejudices can be displaced by the very otherness we find? Yes; I believe it is. But only insofar as one can undertake the work of «distanciation» and come to encounter «oneself as another», as Ricoeur has put it. Strictly speaking, it can't be done, not completely at any rate. But one can certainly move in this direction.

4. A literary anthropology?

[LR] All Iser's last efforts were in the appeal for the foundation of a new discipline: literary anthropology. Such an inquiry on human life requires, for Iser, specific heuristic tools and cannot make use of frames borrowed from other disciplines. The risk would other-

wise be that literature is merely used to provide illustrative examples. Do you think that we need such an independent discipline? Which could be the most suitable premises for it?

[MF] I am afraid I will need to plead at least partial ignorance for this one. I am not an expert on Iser, and I know more about his earlier works than his later ones. (It was more than 30 years ago that I confronted two of his best-known texts – *The Implied Reader* and *The Act of Reading*.) But since I have found myself out on a limb or two already, I might as well keep climbing. Putting aside the fact that I don't know a whole lot about literary anthropology either, my inclination is to say: we have enough disciplines already, and if mine (psychology) is any indication, we should be extremely cautious about bringing others into our midst. For one, the notion that this sort of inquiry «requires specific heuristic tools and cannot make use of frames borrowed from other disciplines» sounds, well, scary. What sorts of heuristic tools could possibly be «required»? And whatever they might be, why must they be cordoned off from those «frames» found in other disciplines? I could be misunderstanding the question, but there is an aspect of the way this enterprise is being conceived that seems somewhat repressive. I suppose that's what disciplines are about. But I'm not sure I see the rationale for this one quite yet. Nor do I see why «the risk would otherwise be that literature is merely used to provide illustrative examples». Once more, I could be missing something. But the bottom line is that I don't see the need for establishing an independent discipline of the sort being suggested. What is it that's not being done that ought to be? And what is it that's being done that ought not to be? These strike me as questions about the ethics of literature study, and unless I can be convinced that a new and improved discipline can bring us somewhere truly new and valuable, I will continue to adhere to the less disciplined modes of inquiry to which I am generally attracted.

5. Do we still need literary theory?

[LR] In his last book *How to do theory*, Iser reflected on the practice of literary theory. What do you think is the role and the use of literary theory at the present day? Do we still need it? How should we do it?

[MF] Truthfully, I think it's audacious for me to address this question. I teach in a psychology department, and although I do maintain some connection to the world of literary theory, I would hardly consider it an intimate one. Since I am engaging in some confessional truth-telling in this interview, I should note that I shared these questions with one of my colleagues, James Kee, at Holy Cross, an English professor (Emeritus), Medievalist, extraordinary thinker/scholar, and friend, who could have actually answered them based on his in-depth knowledge of the field! I didn't, however, want to learn of his responses to these questions until I had formulated my own. Having said this, his influence – as well as that of our mutual friend, poet Robert Cording – looms large in what I have to say. In some ways, this last question you have posed returns us to the issue of disciplines. In this context, though, I find myself moving in a direction that may be more in keeping with what you were after in the previous question. Judging by what's out there, it seems that literature departments have relinquished some of their uniquely literary tasks and given them over to other disciplines, especially the social sciences and history. For some scholars, the turn has been to sociology and anthropology; for others, it

may be cognitive science and linguistics. As a psychologist, it's been interesting to witness this sort of movement, especially in areas like cognitive narratology, in which many of its practitioners know a great deal more about brain processes and cognitive processes than many psychologists (including me) do. Some of this work is fascinating and significant, to be sure. In reading it, however, I sometimes find that the "weight" of the work is more on the side of theory than the literature being theorized about.

I have no particular interest in criticizing this work. It is what it is, and it has its place. But it seems to suggest that the study of literature somehow needs the assistance of other disciplines (in the form of «heuristic tools»?) to carry out its work and that otherwise, it will be insufficiently rigorous, precise – indeed, one might say, scientific, or at least scientifically respectable. For a scholar like me, this is a curious move. As someone who has been critical of the full-scale «scientization» of psychology, I have become more and more interested in urging psychology to think beyond the confines of science for at least a portion of what it does. Meanwhile, significant pockets of literary study and theory are moving in the exact opposite direction, finding in certain forms of scientific thinking the promised land of rigor and precision apparently being sought. Go figure. In any case, let me return, more directly, to this final question you have posed. What seems to be happening, at least in certain corners of literary study, is the imposition of theoretical schemes onto literary works. These schemes might be drawn from strands of theory in sociology, cognitive neuroscience, whatever, the supposition apparently being that these can be brought to bear on the works in question in such a way as to break new interpretive ground. This sort of approach can indeed be valuable; cognitive narratology, among other theoretically-driven pursuits, is there to show it.

There is, however, another, quite different way of thinking about theory. And here, I find myself returning to some important ideas set forth by Heidegger, especially in an essay titled "Science and Reflection" (in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*). For the Greeks, the idea of «theory» (i.e., *theōria*), Heidegger tells us, was seen to involve «[looking] attentively on the outward appearance wherein what presences becomes visible and through such sight – seeing – to linger with it» (163). It thus involved what he describes as «the reverent paying heed to the unconcealment of what presences» (164). As he goes on to note, «The Romans translate *theōrein* by *contemplari*, *theōria* by *contemplatio*». This translation, however, «makes that which is essential in what the Greek words say vanish at a stroke. For *contemplari* means: to partition something off into a separate sector and enclose it therein (165). With this move, therefore, «there comes to the fore the impulse, already prepared in Greek thinking, of a looking-at that sunders and compartmentalizes,» such that theory becomes «the viewing, the observation, of the real» (166). More specifically, theory becomes «an entrapping and securing refining of the real» (168), such that it emerges in its «objectness». Put simply, then, the meaning of theory changed radically, from the kind of intimate, attentive engagement that can «unconceal» and release meaning to a more objectifying form of analytical parsing – which, it would seem, would divert readers from the kind of phenomenological process that Iser and others had explored. In answer to your question about whether we still need literary theory, therefore, my answer would be yes – but the theory most needed would be of the lingering, reverential kind just referred to rather than the more scientized version we frequently see. The notion of a «discipline» is relevant in this context too. But the discipline I am thinking of is more the kind one practices – in meditative practice, for instance – than it is an articulated body of theory and method, as found in this or that academic field.

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