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**“I Just Can’t Quit You”:**

**Ricoeur’s Complicated Relationship with A. J. Greimas**

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Throughout his career, Paul Ricoeur sought out structuralists, analytic philosophers and social scientists of various stripes because he wanted to bring the rigor of science to hermeneutics, and his belief in a scientific dimension of the human studies brought him into contact with some strange bedfellows. Although a committed hermeneut, he never stopped trying to find meaningful dialogue with thinkers laboring to find the replicable structures, logical forms, and measurable values of human being and culture. This explains in part his attraction to structuralism, which was one manifestation of the continued impulse of European intellectual culture toward the scientific legitimation of the humanities. With Algirdas Julien Greimas, Ricoeur found a worthy dialogue partner to engage this common ground. In a series of well-known encounters from the early 1980s through early 90s they interacted with each other forthrightly about the approach of literary semiotics and hermeneutic interpretation to the literary text.

Throughout much of his career, Greimas sought to reduce narrative to its universal constituents so that it might provide, in his own words, “a substitutable subject [that] guarantees the transmissibility of scientific knowledge,” in other words, the holy grail of empirical scientific knowledge – universalizable classification, replicability, predictability. At the same time, Greimas was a protean thinker of substance and complexity who remained always open to questioning his own systematic assumptions, and his encounters with Ricoeur displayed this flexibility and openness to revision.

From his side, Ricoeur pushed hard on Greimas from a hermeneutic direction, but took seriously the explanatory possibilities of Greimas’ narrative theory. Ricoeur conceded to Greimas the utility of semiotics as a tool of explanation that “increases the readability of texts,” but suggested the need for the epistemic reciprocity of particular and universal, and a circular relationship between explanation and understanding. What I am interested in exploring is the original concession Ricoeur makes to Greimas. The commitment to a classificatory system hits right at the heart of the Heideggerian and Gadamerian critique of methodologism for understanding Dasein, and so, while German hermeneutics is deploying Hegel to wrest the humanities from Descartes and Galileo, Ricoeur is leveraging structuralism to pull back in the other direction. What is at stake here is the determination of the hermeneutic perspective itself.

Because Greimas presented a fairly acute case of the semiotic proclivity for scientific method, the character of the engagement can tell us a lot about this question. In my paper I use Ricoeur’s famous maxim “to explain more is to understand better” as the criterion to evaluate his mediation of structuralist objectivity and hermeneutic interpretation. Since French structuralism was not at all monolithic, its use of explanation in approaching narrative and literary texts varied widely. Ricoeur’s movement between Greimas, Benveniste and Lévi-Strauss therefore opens up some space for speculation on how hermeneutics might deploy narrative explanation constructively. So I will use this occasion of Ricoeur’s dialogue with Greimas to attempt my own mediation of Ricoeur’s attempt to reconcile hermeneutics to explanation.

**Who Is the Moral Self? Paul Ricoeur and Judith Butler in Dialogue**

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This paper aims at confronting Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the moral self (1992, 2005a, 2005b, 2007), with poststructuralist Judith Butler’s notion of the ethical self (2004, 2005). (Butler uses “ethics” in her main book about this issue (2005), Ricoeur prefers “morality” in his article on ethics and morality (2007)). Ricoeur did not engage in a discussion with Butler directly – nor did Butler with Ricoeur. Yet, confronting both thinkers is important for the reflection upon the moral/ethical self, and with respect to articulating the relationship between hermeneutics and poststructuralism.

For both thinkers the capacity of narration is a precondition for morality, but for both it has a different origin. For Ricoeur the moral self is a reflexive one that gathers itself in its narrative and is the subject of imputation (2005a, 2005b). Butler’s poststructuralist self narrates in answer to the other’s address. Whereas for Butler the self comes into existence by being addressed and becomes a narrating self by this address, Ricoeur’s self constitutes itself in an act of turning back upon itself.

Yet, R icoeur also understands the self as constituted by its relations to others. That is not the main difference between both thinkers. In the discussion with Levinas, that both thinkers engage in, the differences between them show more clearly. Whereas for Ricoeur the self is commanded by otherness and is fundamentally passive (as it is for Levinas), in order to become ethical it needs to receive and recognize the call of the other. Instead of presuming that the self is closed in upon itself and irrupted by the other, the ethical movement of the other towards the self needs to intersect with the movement of the self to the other for Ricoeur. He writes: “must not the voice of the Other who says to me: ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ become my own, to the point of becoming my conviction?” (1992, p. 339). The moral self, in short, needs the conviction of its own capacities (attestation) to act morally.

Butler, however, seeks for a notion of ethics that does not depend upon the subject’s will. She objects to understanding morality as coming about by “finding one’s will and standing by it, stamping one’s name upon one’s will.” (2004, p. 130). In general, she argues against ethical violence, that she describes as the result of the demand for self-identity and complete coherence. Ethical violence for her includes the demand to be identical to oneself at all times, and the presumption that others are too.

As I will argue, Ricoeur’s moral self is not the self-conscious willing self that Butler is opposed to, but rather one that is as radically passive as Butler’s. However, whereas Butler seeks the ethical qualities of the self in that which binds us, our common constitution (not only in language and culture as hermeneutics wants, but also in the normative frames that constitute us as subjects), Ricoeur holds that morality implies something more, namely conviction. The question of what is central for the moral self, conviction or that which binds us, will be taken further in the paper. Thereby, my aim will be to show the possibilities and limitations of both notions of moral self, and not so much to choose sides for either one of them.

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**Hermeneutics and the Decolonial:**

**Ricoeur, Mignolo, Quijano**

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Recently, Latin American theorists have criticized the postcolonial movement by arguing that its genealogical origin in French post-structuralism makes it unsuitable to the task of criticizing colonial history and its global legacy. The argument is not the simple point that the French actively colonized much of the world, so that French thinkers are unable to help in the liberation of that colonization, but the more accurate and defensible point that the context of French post-structuralism, and its concerns with nihilism especially, make it unsuitable for critical reflection on colonialism. To put the matter starkly: nihilism has never been a central existential concern for the people of the global south, and since post-structuralism seeks to free itself from the metaphysics of presence, which is thought to result in nihilism, those tools are ill suited to the different existential concerns of people living outside of Latin Christendom—often called the “West.” One result of this criticism is that we ought to drop discussion of postcolonialism in favor of the decolonial. Another is that those who seek to address the problem of colonialism seriously ought not draw on the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and, it would seem Paul Ricoeur, since all these thinkers develop significant portions of their thought in response to structuralism and the existential concerns of nihilism.

In response to this criticism, the purpose of the present essay is to demonstrate both that Ricoeur’s thought does not fall to this critique, and that he is able to provide a series of philosophical tools that have so far gone unnoticed in the decolonial movement. In order to make my case for the former point, I draw especially from Ricoeur’s late work *On Translation* in order to demonstrate the significant ways that his reflective hermeneutics departs from the post-structuralist commitments that Derrida and Focuault share, and which are (rightly) understood be obstacles for the aims of colonial criticism. With respect to the latter point, I use Ricoeur’s project in *Memory, History, Forgetting* to suggest a new way to approach the problem of the human condition, which remains consonant with decolonial aims, and which would enable decolonial thinkers to address the implications of globalization for our human condition systematically. I close with a suggested program of research that might prove useful for both Ricoeur scholars and decolonialists alike.

***Traduttore, Traditore—Quasi*:**

**Ricoeur and Derrida on the (In)Fidelity of Translation**

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“The translator is a traitor . . . almost.” That is how one may translate the above title into English. Of course, the traditional phrase that lies behind the title excludes the “*quasi*,” thereby in no way reducing the indictment of discursive treason brought against anyone so bold as to claim to have the capability of transferring meaning adequately from one language to another. Yet, given a certain reading of Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida, one may well, of necessity, add the palliative “almost” in order to do justice to the reality of the systemic ambiguity and the tensive reciprocity that obtains within the paralogy of translating the untranslatable. Both discourse theorists insist that the inevitability of translation never escapes the impossibility of realizing a loyal rendering of the original. Ricoeur’s notion of “plurivocity” and Derrida’s non-conceptual concept of “*différance*” express that meaning remains in flux, always caught in a semantic *kinesis* that never reaches the *stasis* of a decidedly specific inter-lingual transference without remainder. In other words, in their differing ways, both philosophers argue for the compulsory paradox of paraphrase.

Although agreeing at several points about the complexity of translation, about how one can never ignore the diversity of discourses and the disconnection among them that preempts an absolute attestation of semantic clarity, there are significant differences between how Ricoeur and Derrida evaluate the untranslatability of translation. One such difference, which will function as the focus of this essay, concerns their various interpretations of the positive and/or negative context within which linguistic heterogeneity demands constant translation. These various interpretations actually converge at the point of Ricoeur’s and Derrida’s different readings of the provocative Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis, the narrative that attempts to explain the dissemination or confusion of human languages.

Interestingly enough, Derrida seems to take a more traditional perspective on the etiological tale and concludes that the necessity for translation results from a punitive divine act of judgment. Linguistic multiplicity ensues from the giving of the divine name, which, in turn, disrupts the purity of a single mode of communication. Translation, therefore, transpires because of the “trespass of the sign,” of the postlapsarian social and linguistic distanciation that expresses God’s chastisement of humanity. The plurality of language may be considered a positive expression of heterology; however, it remains a *felix culpa*, at best a happy guilt.

Ricoeur, on the other hand, does not consider the Babel story to be a retaliatory text but another indication of the creative differentiation that should not be understood as postlapsarian but as a principle of plenitude. Alterity does not come as a loss of an original homogeneity; on the contrary, it is itself an originary affirmation of the extravagance of plurality. Indeed, Ricoeur argues that translation signifies the reality of “linguistic hospitality,” the possibility of engaging the other *as* other through an appreciation of diversified discourses.

In this essay, I wish to give evidence through their various readings of the Babel story that Ricoeur’s perspective may well be more “deconstructive” than Derrida’s and in some sense more radical.